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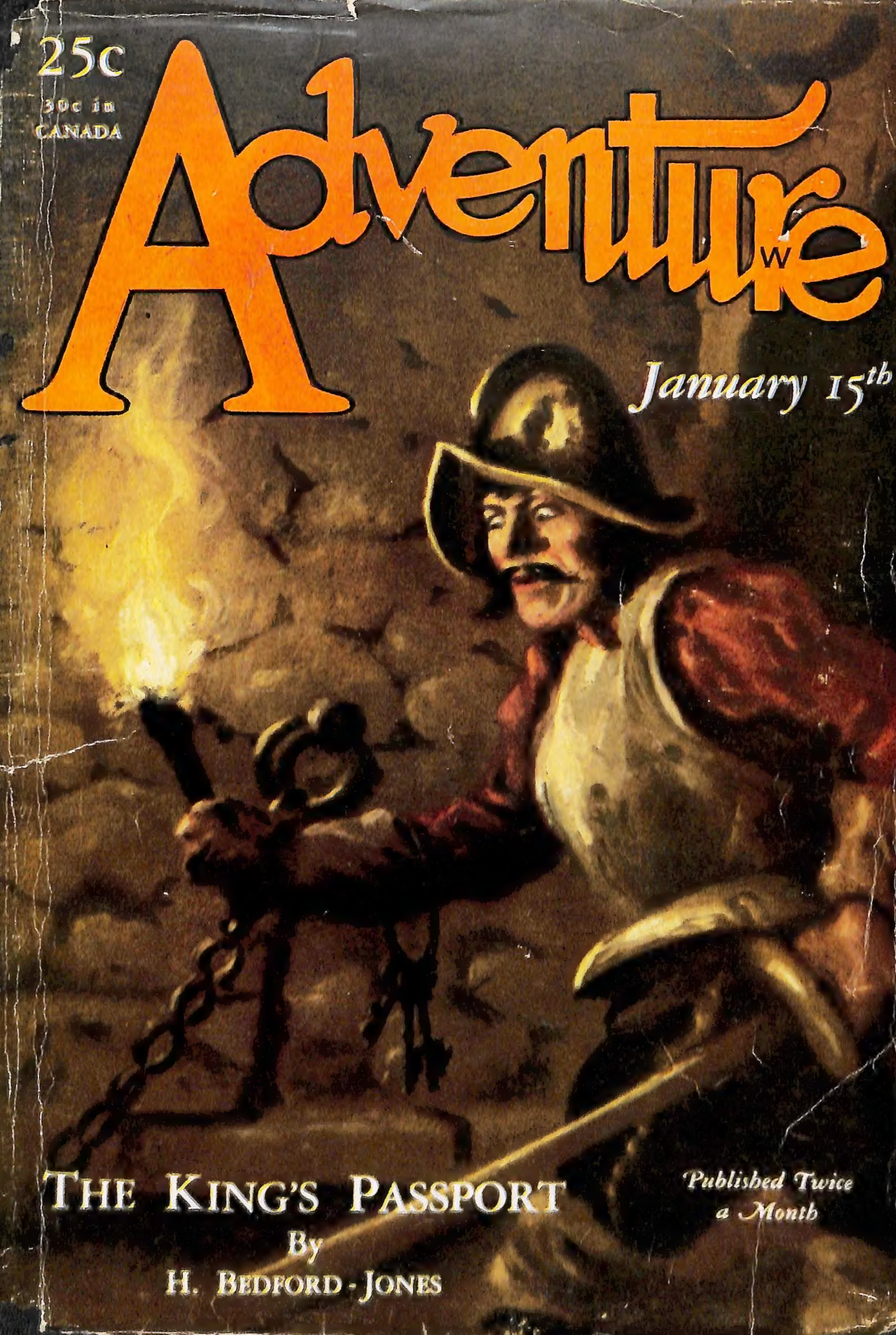

January 15th

THE KING'S PASSPORT

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Published Twice a Month

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A WESTERN NOVELETTE

in which

Solo Smith OUTLAW

plays a sporting game, with his life as stake

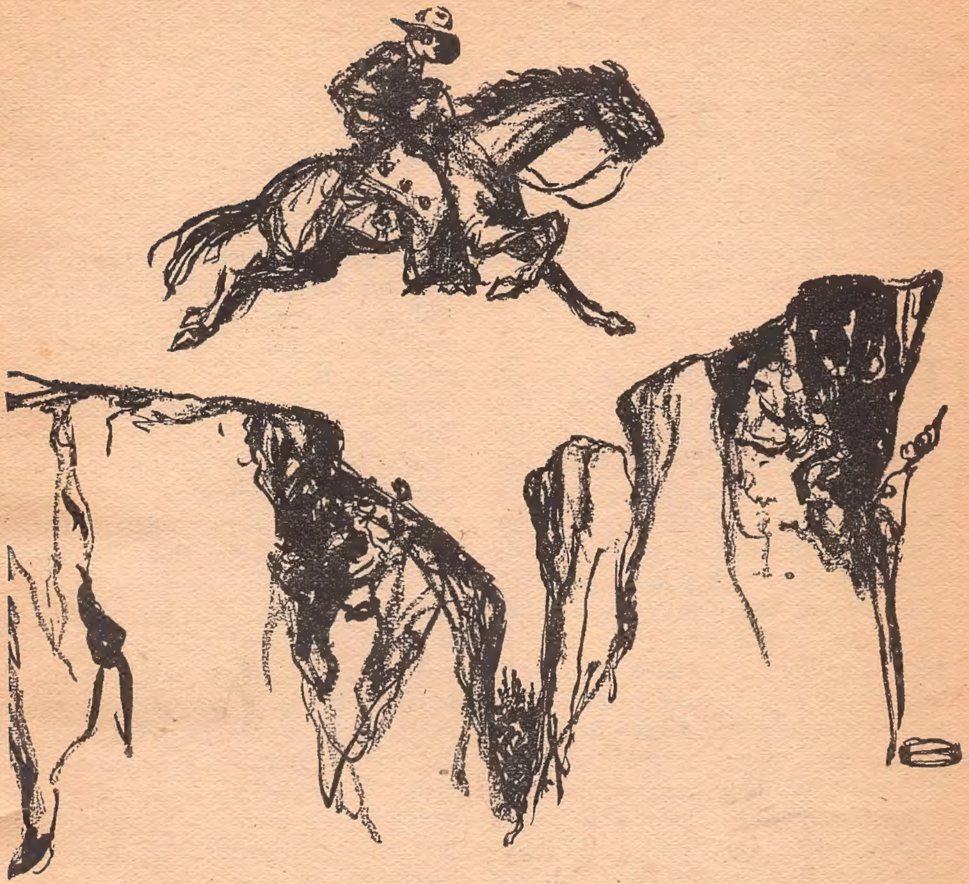
SOLO SMITH sat alone on his ranch-house porch, gazing across the flats to where the barren peaks of the Alaridas notched the skyline. His face was hard set, his mouth grim, but there was a look in his gray eyes that betokened the philosopher, the look of the gambler who has played and lost and wonders if fortune has any other slaps in store for him.

It seemed hardly possible, but Solo's hunch, that subtle psychical barometer of his that had so often forecast events, had rarely failed him, though he had not always followed its promptings; he still refused to register contentment. He did not have much left to lose, he calculated. That morning he had ridden over the ranch, inside the wire, the ranch his father had left him and that, two weeks back, seemed on the fair highway of success. Smith at twenty-two was the youngest of all the cattlemen in the neighborhood; but youth matures early on the range. He knew his business from start to stockyard and his affairs had flourished.

Now, the hands and riders had been paid off, the cook dismissed. The bunkhouse and cookshack stood lonely, the corrals were empty. Aside from Lightning, his own blue dun, that he had managed to buy in through a friend, there was nothing left of the stock, cavvy and herd, on the Double S.

The agents of the loan company had combed the place to satisfy the debt for which he had gone security. Even now he did not regret that. Fleming had been his friend; his death was one of those acts

By J. ALLAN DUNN



of God against which man has no insurance. It had cleaned Smith out. Now his nickname of Solo, he reflected, truly suited him. He had earned it from his preference to do alone the things which other men would have sought help for. Now he was Solo Smith in earnest. On his own.

There would be some strays to come in at the fall roundup but that was a long way off, and he might be far away. He might be able to sell the ranch, but he had already refused an offer for the registered brand. Aside from the fact that ranches were not so easily marketed, he held a strong sentiment for the place that had been his father's, where he had been born and forked his first pony, cast his first rope.

Some day he hoped to be able to come back to it, restock it, when fortune got tired of buffeting him and turned her wheel in his favor. At present he was cleaned out. He had twenty-two dollars to his purse, his horse and saddle, two six-guns, a rifle, ammunition, his personal warbag and slicker roll and a few odds and ends of provisions.

Credit he might secure, but he did not desire it. He could not restock the ranch, provide overhead for food and wages. He strove not to be bitter, though he told himself truthfully enough that he had been handed a hard deal. Some of the youth had gone out of his face never to return.

Tanned deep, he had the aquiline features of the typical American, high cheekbones and a high bridged nose, a face apt to seem normally grave, like that of most riders of the range, save when his smile illumined it. Just now grins were hard to muster. He could see nothing to it but to seek a job, far away perhaps, since jobs were not going begging even for a first rate tophand; neither was he minded to hire himself out in a country where he had been owner. If that was the false pride of youth he could not help it. It must ride, like a bet once placed.

HE ROLLED a brown paper quirly, hating to leave, loath to stay. The blue dun was saddled and waiting; his worldly goods were on its back but Solo still lingered, memories crowding in as he looked out over the blue silver of the sage to where those serrated crests seemed to beckon. They lay beyond the desert; beyond them were mesa lands more or less fertile.

Men sometimes came back from there with tales of gold bearing porphyry, of quartz float that was larded with the precious metal, though none of them had ever found more than gleanings; no mine had been established there. He might turn prospector. Out there at its shimmering foot there might be a rainbow with a pot of gold with which he could bring back the cattle to the Double S. Better perhaps to look for that than to fork a horse and ride range and wire for another man.

It was intensely quiet. The familiar noises were all missing. He could hear the impatient jingle of Lightning's curb chain now and then but, aside from that and the shrilling of the cicadas, the silence was profound. It ate at his spirit like acid on metal, acid that his good sense warned him might leave scars.

He roused himself from his reverie. There was a sky sign on the flat—dust rising from the sage, horsemen riding towards the Double S. For a moment he stood doubtful whether to remain to meet them, ride out to do so, or to avoid them. If his hunch were right there was more trouble coming. He shrugged his shoulders—broad, slightly sloping shoulders that went with his lean flanks and loins.

"Reckon I must be gittin' nervous," he muttered. "Got so I'm jest lookin' fer trouble. If there's any comin' I'll wait here fer it. Mebbe they ain't satisfied with what the stock fetched an' they're comin' back to take the ranch."

He hardly meant that. The creditors of the note on which he had gone jointly with his dead friend had disdained the realty. At lowest current prices the stock would cover them. As the dust cloud resolved itself into three horsemen Smith focused the powerful binoculars that his father had used many a time for locating strays; he wondered whether he had not been right in his surmise.

There were three riders. On the breast of one of them something glittered. It was the sheriff, beyond doubt. Smith knew his big gray. His last trip had been to endorse the legality of the claim of the men who had driven off the cattle and horses. He had been amiable enough, sympathetic for a man of his stern type, but Smith doubted if this was a friendly visit. He stood up, tall and slim and supple, both six-guns holstered at his belt, since that seemed the easier way of carrying them.

The three men came down the lane between the corrals. Their faces were those of men who rode on business of none too pleasant a nature.

"Sure looks like all my bets was coppered these days," Smith told himself as they failed to answer his greeting and salute. Beside the sheriff was Bill Edwards, a man for whom Smith had little use.

There was a girl in Ventura whom Edwards wanted, a girl he meant to have. He was ostensibly a horse trader, with a small ranch where he bred some stock, but he spent most of his time and all his evenings, gambling at the Cactus Café. Mary Sesnon did not welcome his courtship. She had not masked her preference for Solo, a fact of which Solo, fancy free, was blissfully unaware and Edwards bitterly certain.

The third man was the driver of the stage that ran three times a week between Ventura and Calor. An oldtimer, weathered, grizzled and well thought of. They halted at the foot of the ranch-house steps. The sheriff and Baldy Herne, both close to fifty, dismounted a little stiffly. Edwards stayed in his saddle, his eyes narrowed, a gleam of malice in them, a sneer beneath his trimmed mustache.

"Howdy, folks!" said Smith. "I'm erbout ready to light out fer parts unknown. I reckon I should say I'm glad to see you but you've been a sort of a hoodoo to me, lately, Sheriff, though I'll erlow it ain't your fault. I ain't got a thing to offer you. Pantry's plumb empty. You ain't got ernother service warrant up your sleeve, I hope, Sheriff? Nothin' left but the ranch."

He grinned at them, his hunch warning him to look out. He stood at the top of the steps as they ascended in ominous silence. Edwards seemed to change his mind, dismounted and followed them.

WHERE was you round eight o'clock this mornin', Solo?" asked the sheriff. His keen eyes, the lower lids straight, the uppers puckered, took in Smith's equipment. "I see you're wearin' two guns," he said. "Been usin' 'em lately?"

Solo's eyes turned to steel, he spoke in a drawl. The sheriff's thumb was hooked in his belt, his fingers handy to the wooden butt of his heavy six-gun. All three were armed.

"You gents don't seem over an' above sociable," said Smith. "There ain't no law agin totin' two guns, is there? I've seen others wearin' 'em thetaway. As fer where I've been, that's my business, but I don't mind tellin' you I've been ridin' the ranch since seven o'clock, sayin' good by to it."

The sheriff's steady glance did not waver but he seemed to have received confirmation of some sort.

"The stage was held up an' robbed at the ford on Alder Crick at ten minutes after eight this mornin'," he said. "Man was ridin' a dun hawss. He wore two ivory handled Colts; he had a mask made of black cloth; he wore a neckerchief with a peacock pattern, the same sort of clothes you've got on. Robbed the passengers an' the mail, shot Curley White an' looted the express box. Unless Curley takes a quick turn fer the better, the man is wanted fer murder as well as highway robbery. We found his tracks from where his hawss was hid out in the willers, an' the sign led through your wire. We lost it fer a spell on the shale but we picked it up agen, comin' straight here. He'd opened up the letters an' scattered most of 'em, though he seems to have started to set fire to 'em. Likely figgered smoke might give him away."

"He don't seem to have taken much pains to cover himself, noways," said Solo. "You might have picked up my tracks comin' this way, but I was the other side of the ranch at eight o'clock. Those tracks ain't more 'n two hours old. Likewise, you must think I'm a damn' fool, Sheriff, scatterin' signs all over my own place. I take it you're figgerin' I stuck up the stage. You're plumb *loco*."

"You lost all your money an' stock on that note of Fleming's, Solo. You've got the name of bein' some reckless. It looks like you might be desperate enough to turn a trick like this. Sign is sign an' I know it. There ain't two hawsses ever shod alike or with just the same gaits. I kin read sign . . ."

Smith shrugged his shoulders. Tracking was the sheriff's hobby. In Solo's opinion he rode it too hard. Now he could see that all three men were convinced of his guilt. They had come to arrest him, with evidence enough to hang him if the express messenger died. In any event a long term faced him. Baldy Herne took off his Stetson and mopped his pate. He did not seem to relish his mission.

"If the hawss was hid out in the willers," Solo asked a little wearily, feeling the cards were stacked against him once more, "how do you know it was a dun?"

"I saw you ridin' off," said Herne.

"You saw some one ridin' off. I ain't the only man to pack two ivory handled guns, nor ride a blue dun for that matter. But if I held up a stage, I wouldn't ride my regular hawss. My clothes are ordinary enough. There's been a gross of peacock patterned neckerchiefs sold to Wilson's store. As I told you, I'm ready to ride out, to look me up a job or go prospectin' in the Alaridas. I've got nothin' on me but twenty-two pesos. You can overhaul my hawss. I've had a run of tough luck lately, but I ain't tryin' to break it stickin' up a stage an' shootin' Curley White."

"You've been known to be quick with your artillery, Solo. I reckon you'd better turn it over."

"Aw, hell!" cried Edwards. "What's the use of him stallin'? I was on the stage. I know your hawss an' I know you for all your mask. As for your bein' a fool, I'll say none but a fool would try a holdup wearin' a tie ring like the one you've forgot to take off, Smith."

Involuntarily Solo's hand traveled to his tie ring, hammered out of silver by a Navajo, purchased by him a year ago.

"Looks like it was plumb unlucky fer me you happened to be on that stage, Edwards," he said evenly. "Might be unlucky for you, too, seein' you're lyin'. You see this tie ring, Herne?"

"I was watchin' your guns," said the driver. "I'm sorry you made this play, Smith. I knew your dad an' liked him. You should be glad he's dead."

Solo tensed. A flood of crimson showed through his tan. His steely eyes became tiny slits.

"You don't need to bring him into this," he said. "You figger you've got the goods on me. Why didn't you look above the shale? From Alder Crick the shortest way to the hills was over my land."

"Thet's what we figgered. You worked close to home. I reckon you've cached the loot. Thet'ud be the best play. There warn't no need to go above the shale. I picked up the sign goin' to it an' from it—here."

"I suppose you never made a mistake sign readin'? I recollect a time or two when you fell down."

"There's no sense talkin'," said the sheriff. "You're my man, Smith. Gimme those guns."

"Hold on, jest a minute. Suppose I could prove to you where I was when the stage was held up?"

A FLICKER of relief appeared on the sheriff's face. He liked the boy; Solo seemed to him a boy. He had respected his father. He knew nothing against Smith save a certain love of high betting, a proneness to quick offensive in a quarrel.

"I'd be glad if you could," he said, "but it 'ud have to be mighty good proof to git you out of this mess. Thet sign—"

"Two reliable witnesses be enough?"

"Why—"

"Then here they are! I was waitin' for 'em to show up."

Smith's voice rang out and then he flashed a grin. He had made up his mind. The sheriff's stubbornness over sign reading, the break that had brought the highwayman across his land, the identity, easily flimsy at such a moment, above all, Edwards' direct lie, had put him in the toils. Misfortune had flouted him again but he was not taking this last blow lying down. All his supple coordination acted like a swiftly uncoiling spring that sets off smoothly oiled mechanism.

As the sheriff, with Herne and the chagrined Edwards, fooled by his acting, turned to see the identity of the two witnesses Smith spoke of so confidently, he kicked the former hard on the shin. The nerve shock of the sudden blow straight to the bone brought the officer to a crouch, forgetful for the moment of everything but the swift anguish.

The ivory handled six-guns appeared in Smith's two hands as swiftly as a conjuror's magic pass. One second his hands were empty; a pulse beat and the two weapons were covering the three in his lightning draw, their muzzles moving in slight arcs, like the sway of a king cobra's neck, twelve times as venomous.

"I hate to do this to you, Sheriff," he said. "I reckon you're right in your own mind. An' I am in mine. I didn't do this. Mebbe I can prove I didn't. I aim to try, but I aim to do it free an' not cooped up in a calaboose with the county attorney set on hangin' me on your evidence. Part of it's cooked up, meanin' Edwards. An' you're as stubborn as an army mule about that sign readin' of yours. Willin' to read an innocent man to the gallows. Fella's guilty unless he can prove himself innocent!

"Don't git funny, any of you. You're threatenin' my life an' liberty, callin' me a robber an' a murderer. Come up these steps slow an' line up with your faces to the house wall. I'm meanin' business. I should crack you over your skull, Edwards, for tellin' a dirty lie. I don't know what your motive is but I ain't through with you. Hands up agin the boardin', gents, while I take your guns. You've said I was quick with mine, Sheriff. This is the only time I've pulled first but I'm goin' through with the play."

THE SHERIFF had brought along handcuffs and Smith put them on the sheriff's wrists. He marshaled them all three to the bunkhouse where he knew there was a discarded lass-rope and some latigo straps left by his riders. He saw them rolled into three of the bunks, face down, a tie rope connecting the bonds at wrists and ankles. He did not bother himself about seeing that Edwards was comfortable though he took some pains over the sheriff and Herne so that they should not be unnecessarily chafed.

The iron had not yet gone into his spirit. The adventure of the action appealed to him. To trail the actual highwayman, bring him in, evade the posse that would try to hunt him down—that was the program that now exhilarated him, crystalized in stern purpose.

"It ain't goin' to be extry comfortable for a spell," he said. "But I reckon you'll be set loose before long. Then you can trail my high sign, Sheriff. I'm not sleepin' in a cell tonight. *Adios.*"

He looked toward town as he came out of the bunkhouse, seeing what he had expected, a cloud of dust. Others had got wind of where the sheriff had gone. The rest of the passengers would have talked and Edwards would probably have spilled their destination, though he guessed the sheriff would have held his mission secret until he was sure of his man.

He held no grudge against the sheriff. Edwards' conduct was still inexplicable but it was the act of a skunk and he meant to even up that matter later, when he had proved his innocence. There was but one chance to find the guilty man, but it was a chance he welcomed. His youth was resilient, his spirits high as he drove the three horses into the corral, cut the cinches and mounted the impatient Lightning.

He knew every inch of his ranch and he rode through arroyos and draws, by masking mesquite and other growths, swinging a circle that would take him out on the desert. The night winds would broom his trail away as he rode. He meant to double back. It was a sporting game with his liberty, perhaps his life, as the stake. The county attorney was a severe prosecutor, jealous of his prestige, inflamed with political ambitions. To convinct Solo Smith would be a shining mark in his record of efficiency, and a case that would bring wide publicity. The evidence was all sufficient. If Curley died, they would hang Smith, unless he produced the right man. They would not bother to look for him.

Halting on a ridge that died out on the edge of the desert, Solo, through his glasses, saw the dust of the men from town close to the ranch-house. He chuckled. His sign had been plain enough for awhile but he had blotted it out on rim rock. They would think he had made for the hills where they fancied he had cached the loot.

He was on his own, going solo, with twenty-two dollars in his pocket, proscribed, an outlaw, with the hue and cry after him. Bills would be posted, a reward set—his wits against theirs.

He filled his canteen at a spring and, picking out a wash where dead men's fingers crawled and giant chollas stood sentinel, he rode out into the desert. Already the sun was sinking down toward the Alaridas, turning the jagged outlines to a purple silhouette that looked as if it was cut out of cardboard. Sunset clouds were gathering, the temperature was beginning to fall and with the change the little restless desert winds started to blow, aimlessly rolling the fine dust grains along, filling in his tracks. Before they discovered he had ridden west the trail would be erased.

"SHERIFF thinks he's a wizard on sign, Lightnin'," he said. "He'll have to make magic the next day or so to trail us, hawss."

Smith was no longer bitter. He was buoyant of soul and he hummed a song as he guided Lightning over the alkali, keeping to the hollows, in which the desert abounded for all its flat appearance from above. Once he stopped between dunes and deliberately blanketed his sign with a slicker, returning backward, obliterating his trail.

Then he swung off over weathered lava while the sun touched the Alaridas and went down with the sky blooming like a flower, fading rapidly. The desert closed in about him. The great stars came out, burning as steadily as candles. It grew cold. He could not risk a fire. He had brought no fuel. He watered Lightning and gave him some grain out of the sack he had carried for such emergencies. Then he dug a hollow for his hip, rolled himself in his blanket and turned in for a few hours.

It was about an hour after midnight by the wheeling Big Dipper when he woke automatically. He whistled to the dun, who came to him like an affectionate dog. He saddled and started east again. There was no moon; but the dun's eyes found the starlight sufficient. Once off the desert, Smith knew his route. He doubted that the sheriff was still on the trail. No man could read sign at that hour. They would scour the hills tomorrow, but Solo meant to be ahead of them. They would have covered the ranch by nightfall; it was the last place they would look again for him and he was sure he could evade them.

The sheriff might pick up the sign Smith was sure lay above the shale, but he might not. It depended upon the smartness of the man who had robbed the stage. Solo was confident of his own ability.

There are men born with a natural instinct to discover sign, to cut it and never lose it. The sheriff had his theory of hoofmarks and gait, but gait was broken in the hills and there were plenty of places where prints would not register. It was the knack, backed by experience, of putting one's self in the place of the quarry, whether steer or horseman, that really counted to Solo Smith—the selection of routes in a difficult region, the little marks of broken rock and twigs, of hair caught in brambles or cactus, droppings, and the boldness to strike at conclusions rather than putter foot by foot that caught up with the chase before all spoor got stale or washed out by wind.

The sheriff fancied himself, but Solo believed himself the better tracker of the two. The robber would have twenty hours' start by the time Solo picked up his trail at dawn. The man had gone into the hills rather than the desert because of the impossibility of crossing the latter in daylight without leaving sky sign and sand trail when there were no winds blowing. The passage for a horse while the sun shone was a feat hardly to be accomplished, even by a man who knew the wells.

When the robber got his nerve back after shooting a man, robbing the mail, the express and private passengers, the man might decide to drift back into Ventura, if he came from there, or to make Calor with a plausible story to back him if any questions were asked.

But, for the time, unless he was a sheer, cold blooded fiend, he would be panicky. His first impulse would be to hide out in the hills until the chase died down. There were many places in the Sierra where he could stay under cover, if he could get there without leaving trail or being seen.

Smith gave him credit for cleverness. The bandit would realize that the only known pass through the Sierra for twenty miles in either direction was at Madrugada, that it would be watched, other regular avenues of escape being blocked. If he knew that another man had been accused of his crime he could take things easily, but he would believe himself hunted, be on the lookout for the pursuit and, because of Smith's avoiding arrest, the blockade would not be withdrawn.

If the man did try the pass and ran into the sheriff's watchers who had been warned by wires and telephone messages in all directions, nothing could suit Smith better. He could see the crestfallen faces of the sheriff and Herne when they found they had accused the wrong man and had fallen for false evidence. Edwards would be quizzed about recognizing the nonexistent tie ring. Solo would do more than quiz.

He knew that until they were assembled and compared the testimonies of the men who had been on the stage would be widely varied. No two tales alike. Herne, best qualified for observation, had confessed that the gun muzzles occupied his attention. Men, even in normal conditions, never saw the same things alike; under the menace of death they would imagine more than they saw.

Edwards, with his deliberate lie, since it was hardly credible that the true robber had worn a ring like the individual pattern made by the Navajo who had hammered out Solo's ornament, had practically cinched Smith's identity. It was easy enough to think he had let loose the hint about the color of the horse so that other men would absorb it subconsciously in their excitement. Feeling themselves in some degree heroes of the occasion, they would tell it to eager listeners as their own conception. Eventually their individual evidence would unify through the prosecutor's coaching.

FALSE dawn found Smith at the upper edge of the wide belt of shale that crossed his ranch. The slowly graying light disclosed him afoot. Lightning was hidden out in the brush while Solo covered the ground looking for sign. He knew which way he had ridden the day before; he knew Lightning's tracks, having shod him.

He worked swiftly, for fear of being seen from higher ground by searchers who might have remained out over night. All his senses were alert. That side of the Sierra was still in shadow, which made his work doubly difficult. In the flat light footprints remained obscure. He found the scattered mail, some of it, burned or charred, and used that as a definite starting point. The undamaged mail, he judged, had been taken by the sheriff, since there were no ripped bags in sight.

Just as the sun wheeled up by Madrugada Pass, its far sent rays touching the distant peaks of Alarida with a sudden burst of glowing gold as if a swift brush had been passed along them, he found his first sign, right on the edge of the shale. It was the end of a paper match, such as punchers carried in the little advertising cartons stuck in their hat bands.

It was not his. He had not lighted a cigaret in that neighborhood. It was not from the sheriff or his party, unless they had revisited this place last night. He was sure they were trying to follow the trail he had left for them to the rimrock. He was sure that this match with its yellow stain unbleached was the beginning of the trail that he was set to follow, if needs be, for weeks and months until he found his man.

His assurance increased when he discovered a fracture of the shale where a metal shoe had struck it. He cast about on higher, softer ground and saw distinct prints. They led upward. He surveyed the contours, calculating the likely route. The man would keep to cover as much as possible unless he was a sheer fool. The throwing away of the match had been purely automatic, Solo fancied. He might have remembered it and hesitated to go back and search for it. It was one of those clews the criminal invariably leaves unless long habitude in crime has trained him to throw aside regular customs.

From the bottom of a draw the trail led on and up. Smith walked with Lightning trailing him. There were places where he might have been sighted if he were in the saddle. He was certain that the posse was after him with sunrise. The man he was tracking was a good horseman, selecting the best routes with a view to concealing his tracks. Smith thought with him. The man could not know always what lay ahead, and there were places where he had been forced to descend steep pitches. His mount had cat haunched, slid down on its tail, leaving unmistakable trace.

He was making for the general direction of Madraguda, following a winding cañon that deepened between towering walls that frowned darkly, their smooth, almost sheer sides bare of all vegetation above the detritus line. A stream shared the narrow floor, tributary to the creek that ran through his own Double S holding. There were pools in the more shadowy parts, though little sun ever struck the depths of this grim corridor, its patches of grass and brush and clumps of stunted piñon, oak, choke cherry and cedar.

The pools were crystal clear with trout darting in them. The man had watered his horse. There was the crescent indentation of a shoetip in the shingle where the man himself had lain down, drinking from the flowing water, scraping away lichen with his feet as he did so.

Soon the cañon bent to right and again to left, its walls contracting, leaving room for nothing more than a horse trail beside the creek. On either side were lateral side cañons and up one of these Smith was sure his quarry must have turned aside, unless he was idiot enough to attempt Madraguda, hoping for sufficient start to take him through unchallenged. It was very quiet, save for the rush of the swift water, the shrill of cicadas. Now and then the dun's shoes rang sharply on flinty rock, a sound that was distinct and carried far. If the man were hiding out he might hear it, sensitive of any sound of pursuit. Any moment might bring the crash of a rifle shot from ambush, but Smith kept on. He had to take those risks and he accepted them automatically, surveying the branches of the main cañon as he came to them, finding most of them shallow box cañons without outlet.

He came to a narrow cleft that split the left hand wall at an acute angle. Brush screened the entrance and he scrutinized it closely. It was pliant stuff that would spring back into place with the passage of a horse but, if one had gone that way, it must have left sign. Solo dismounted and found it, the bark slashed from root stems by its hoofs.

The gorge became so narrow that in places his knees rubbed both walls at once. Unless the man knew this region better than Smith, he might have come to an impasse, have turned back or even now be crouching in wait.

There was sound and movement in the brush ahead of him at a twist in the ravine. Smith's six-gun came out in a blur of polished metal. He saw the mule ears and white flag of a yearling buck and he breathed easier. There was no one in the gorge, had not been for quite a while, certainly not since dawn, or the buck would have bolted and not returned.

Solo realized that a man hunting might have explored this gorge once and remembered it, knowing it led out somewhere. He rode cautiously. His hunch told him that he was getting warm. Ledges lay ahead like a crude, steep stairway. The brush ended and here and there prickly pear grew with pink or yellow blossoms starred against the flat leaves and gray rocks. . A rattlesnake whirred and Lightning shied. Smith had holstered his gun and left the snake alone, though he could not see it, coaxing the dun past the spot.

AT THE end of the gorge he checked the horse sharply. He had hardly expected anything like the view before him, though he knew the range held many pocket parks that, for the most part, only the buzzards had surveyed and the wild game frequented.

A grassy area lay before him, a hundred feet or so below the general level of the surrounding cliffs, sloping down to a stream that flowed from a willowed swamp. A spur of rock wall split the far end into two parts. It was an ideal hideout. Instinctively he knew his man was here, probably in one of the two glens. He looked for smoke, sniffed for it, but got no indication. The man might be asleep. Here and there in the little park were great boulders fallen from the cliffs or carried there by glacial action. Smith noted them, figuring on cover as he rode in, mapping out a way.

There was no practical way round the cliffs to the spur. They were broken with deep cleavages, through one of which to his left, the stream made its exit. He could hear the sound of a waterfall. It was still early enough for game to have been grazing; part of the place was yet in shadow, the grass dewy. Deer were likely to have been there at that hour.

As far as Solo could see and judge, the man, if he were here—and he was, unless the sign was false—had hemmed himself in. At the angles where the spur left the main cliffs the walls were steep. The outlet of the stream was, from the sound of the fall, a steep one. Once down on the level he saw how he could ride well in, screened by the boulders for perhaps nearly half the area; then he proposed to stalk on foot. The grass was long. The swamp willows masked part of the right hand glen. In both of them there were brush and trees. The crucial step was to get down the slide on which there was certain evidence that a rider had gone ahead.

Smith did not hesitate. Solo would be moving fast; and unless his man were on the nigh side of the park he would have to take a long shot and a doubtful one. He might lie *perdu.* He might not see Solo at all.

There was a thrill to the descent, with Lightning sliding on his rump, not without a clatter of the weathered stuff which the sound of the fall might deaden. He got to the bottom without challenge and worked among the big boulders. Now and then he pricked the dun sharply, and Lightning took the spaces in great leaps where there was danger of being glimpsed and a snapshot fired.

He felt a pricking of his scalp, a tingling in his finger ends as he reached the last outlying mass of rock, two boulders close together between which he left the dun, knowing it would stay there indefinitely, would never betray him by a whicker to another horse as long as it was saddled. He took his rifle, worked the well oiled lever and set the trigger for action before he snaked out into the long grass, worming through it with infinite caution.

He had gone about fifty yards when two mountain hares, a pair of jackrabbits, bounded out of a tuft of herbage where they had been feeding, their ears pink against the sun.

Smith crouched instantly, then moved aside on all fours. The whine of a steel jacketed bullet passed just over him, a little to one side. He heard the report of the high powered rifle, booming in the enclosed place. It was hard to trace its trajectory, for there was not a hint of vapor from the smokeless powder, but he fancied it had come from the willows.

THE NEXT moment a horseman came riding at full speed out of the willows at the inner fringe of the swamp, firing again from the saddle, spurring his horse, intent upon riding the possible intruder down in the open, knowing him afoot.

Smith leveled his rifle and fired as the horse leaped over a gully. He missed. He fired again and the horse came down with a crash, shot through the shoulder, his rider flung over his head. He hated to shoot the beast but he wanted the man alive. There was no movement save from the wounded horse; the man seemed to be stunned, or foxing. They were not a hundred yards apart. Solo left his rifle and crept forward with his six-gun handy. The man had taken his chances, desperate, but thinking he had the best of it, prepared to shoot it out, sure that the intruder was after him, proclaiming himself an outlaw.

It was a grim business creeping through the long stems that bowed in betrayal at the least false move. The hurt horse plunged, rolling on its back. Once it squealed and then was still. Only the usual sounds of such a place persisted.

Smith came to a gully and waited, watching and listening. A tuft of rank burdock was suddenly agitated. Smith fired from a crouch, extending his gun arm at right angles, his wrist curving, sending a bullet fairly into the crown of leaves that surrounded the nodding stems. Both men had used a trick, but the other had the advantage. He had been lying full length, deliberately stirring the burdock with his foot. Now he leaped upright several feet away, firing fast. A bullet thudded into the ground close to Smith's foot as he sprang up to take the challenge, shoot it out.

A bullet clipped his shoulder at the sleeve seam, nicking the flesh as he jumped to one side with his first shot. Another tore through his sombrero rim, close to the band. The man was shooting to kill and shooting straight. Smoke haze drifted in blue wreaths with the reek of powder gas amid the detonations of the heavy guns. Lead ripped Solo's cheek like the slash of red hot metal. The first mortal shot would end the swift duel. He knew he had hit his man in the left shoulder, but he had not gone down, though his arm hung slack.

Then he pitched forward, headlong, in unmistakable fashion and lay still, crushing the grasses. Smith saw his weapon fall from nerveless fingers. The issue had been forced and he had killed him with a bare margin of safety.

He did not realize all that it meant until he stood over the body, blood dripping from his cheek to join the splotch on his shoulder. The man was dead. The killing had been inevitable but, if this were the robber, his death availed Smith nothing.

He looked at the face as he turned the body over. There was no post-mortem placidity to it; the sharp features were still set in a fierce scowl, the eyes, wide open, stared up at him with a malevolence not yet dimmed.

He knew the man. Smalley. Hank Smalley, a nester suspected of rustling, unproven but suggested by his almost constant supply of money for drinking and gambling. He had been cleaned out in Ventura at the Cactus Café the week before, announcing his intention of going to Calor, trying his luck at mining, esteemed a good riddance. The abandoned shack he had preempted was said to be once more vacant.

His face was a death mask of avarice and cunning, thin nosed, high cheekboned and thin lipped. He was dressed much as Solo was, even to the peacock-patterned neckerchief, a common enough style that had lately become popular. He had two holsters, the gun in one of them still. Both ivory handled.

Smith left him for a moment and went to the horse, ready to put it out of misery, but it was dead. It was more of a roan than a dun. Amid a rising dust cloud in a hurried getaway among willows it's hue could readily have been mistaken. Now it showed clearly enough, an animal never to be confused with Lightning by a competent and calm observer. The saddle was stripped of all but lasso rope; evidently the man had a camp beyond the willows.

Granted that he found indisputable evidence that the man had robbed the stage and found the loot, he could prove nothing. It would be said that he had killed the man because Smalley had tried to make away with him, convinced Smalley was on the trail, part, perhaps, of a posse. Smith himself had pointed out the commonplace variety of clothes. The crime had been fastened to him. To return would be to go back into the trap again. If Curley were dead another murder would be added to his score.

SOLO looked at the stolen money with a frown, considering what to do. He was charged with taking it; even restitution would not help him. He was likely to need money. Twenty-two dollars would not go far. If only he had been able to cripple Smalley as he had intended if he had to shoot at all, he could take him in. It was the adverse turn of the wheel again. He was playing against cogged dice and he felt as if Fate was grinning at him from the cliffs.

Whichever way he turned it over he could see only one way in which the prosecution would look at what had happened or what they would believe had happened, if they ever got to know about it.

They would claim that Smith had run across a scapegoat in the hills and had deliberately sacrificed Smalley in an attempt to prove an alibi. They would claim that Smalley was hunting—backed by his camping outfit—and that Solo had bushwhacked him, if he had not killed in fear of capture.

Smalley was not as tall as Smith by four inches but that fact would be fogged by their conviction that Smith was the man linked up with the positive identification of the tie ring by Edwards. They would not allow the claim that the roan, seen through dust, had been mistaken for a dun.

It was true that Smalley was hard up and a doubtful character; but Smith was equally in need of money. More so, since he would be considered bitter at losing his herd, whereas Smalley was always broke off and on, used to it, indifferent.

He went slowly back to the body. His first shot had hit high up under the left armpit breaking no bone, close to where he had intended placing it, missing the lungs. But it had not stopped Smalley, desperately at bay.

His second shot, or his third, for one had missed clean, perhaps when Smalley was falling, so swift had been the stream of lead Solo had sent; had struck just to the side of the left nipple, piercing the heart.

Smalley, he reflected, was an almost friendless man, boasting that he had cut loose from kith and kin. He carried no wallet, no papers.

Solo came to a grim resolve. He would destroy all traces of the camp, finish burning the mail sack, cache the saddle. He held a vague hope of being able some day to use it to prove his own innocence, a hope as dim and fleeting as breath on a mirror.

He would give the body decent burial, dressed as it was, and drag the horse to a place where it could lie hidden until the buzzards and coyotes cleaned and scattered its bones. He did not have much time but these things had to be done. His only exit was by way of the cañon. To go up it would be fatal; down it he might meet a posse. Men would be out all over the range by now. He had left some sign himself, following Smalley, that might be traced, since he had not in his hot pursuit stayed to blot it. The sheriff might be a crank about his sign cutting but he was far from an amateur at it.

"I killed you, Smalley," he said to the quiet body. "You was out to git me. I reckon we can call it even."

He had no implement with which to dig but he lifted the corpse to his saddle and led the dun with its limp burden to where a rock slide furnished means of raising a cairn above the body, protection from wild beasts and birds. He succeeded in making it inconspicuous, sure of finding it in case of need.

Using Lightning he dragged the dead roan to a cleft where, pressed for time, he left it, masking the entrance with brush that would stay green for a day or so. He stored the saddle in a dry cave, on a ledge, thrusting it well back from casual inspection. He destroyed all evidence of a camp, taking along the dead man's blanket roll, tarp and slicker, with his six-guns that were the same caliber as his own—another sinister coincidence in determining who had shot Curley.

He had taken the ammunition from Smalley's cartridge belts, leaving them on him. He might need all the shells he could carry before he got through. He cached the rifle in the cave with the saddle. His own was enough and already Lightning would be carrying plenty.

He took the spare provisions, the pot and the skillet. They would come in handy and he considered he had earned them. He stuffed the money into his own slicker roll, not yet determined what to do with it. The cards were stacked against him and he was feeling bitter. He had hardened within as well as without in the past hour. More youth was erased permanently from his features; the old frankness in his eyes was supplanted by a steely look.

HE REJECTED the thought of distant flight. He might be an outlaw but not a fugitive. That idea repelled, aside from the manner in which it would be interpreted. He might have friends yet who believed in him, or would, after the first excitement had died down? He might have to leave the county, but they were not going to drive him from the State. Some day he was going to clear up the robbery. Edwards was the key to that puzzle, he believed, with his false testimony.

"I'll have to hide out in the range till nightfall," he told himself. "I can cross the desert after the sun goes down an' it gits cold. Reckon the dun'll be able to make it. I can strike Injun Wells round midnight an' be in the Alaridas come dawn. There's that broken mesa country back of it that couldn't be beat for playin' tag. Long's I'm an outlaw I might as well git ready to live as one."

He glanced down at his two guns. Smalley's were in the bed roll. In the fight he had instinctively used only one of them.

"I'll have to practise up with the left hand," he said aloud with a wintry smile. 'Two Gun Smith,' that's what they'll be callin' me from now on. Sheriff seemed to figger I was a two gun man a'ready. Have to live up to my reputation. All right, Lightnin'. They can't beat you round here. You an' me, we'll hit the long trail."

The dun had grazed and watered but Smith had no present appetite. He might be cut off before he got out of the cañon, let alone the range. He mounted to leave the tragic place. There was one spot he had in mind if he could reach it unfollowed. From there he could get down to the desert. A long trail but a safe one for his purposes, with a little luck.

"I will," he answered his hunch as if it had been spoken aloud. "You can bet your boots on that! I've no notion for lyin' up in jail, an' my neck's long enough to suit me, without stretchin'. I reckon Smalley threw that mask of his away or burned it," he mused as he made for the narrow cleft. "I didn't see it anywheres. Warn't on him."

He did not know that the mask was in the sheriff's possession, a black silk handkerchief stock-embroidered with a single letter. Punchers often buy them through mail order houses. The letter was S. Sinister enough as evidence against Smith in the sheriff's mind—not thinking of Smalley. The sheriff knew that Smith did wear a black handkerchief as a scarf on sundry occasions. So did other riders.

Where the cleft and cañon joined, Smith sat, man and horse like statues, listening. Nothing but the sound of the stream, the sough of the wind now drawing down the ravine, the chirrup of cicadas. Lightning cocked his ears once and turned his lustrous eyes down the gorge. There was nothing to gain by staying, everything to lose.

He went slowly. The wind was light but it was against him. It would help to carry any clink of hoofs, jingle of curb chain and it would check any coming from the other direction.

He depended upon Lightning but, when the warning came it was plain enough for both to hear it together—men's voices, sounding abruptly, suddenly checked, just round the serpentine double twist of the cañon at the first bend, less than fifty yards away.

He took the only cover at hand, a shallow lateral. He could see its back wall little more than a hundred feet away. He might have to die at the bottom of it, emptying his guns. They would show him no quarter now. Killing him would close the case, save the country money. He had resisted arrest, had convicted himself.

Grimly he loosed both six-guns, meaning to shoot two handed. He was inclined to be ambidexterous by nature. He did not dismount as yet, but stayed screened by the brush, waiting for them to come on, perhaps to pass. Luck might veer his way. It should.

He could see them through his screen—the sheriff in the lead, his face sternly intent, glancing about him at the rocky walls, then at his feet. He had five men with him, a citizen's posse, probably volunteers. Solo knew all of them by sight. Once they had been his friends; now they were hunting him as they might have chased a lobo that had got after their young stock. Riders and shots, all of them, two ranch owners, three their tophands.

Their features matched the sheriff's but there was a certain pleasurable excitement in all of them, the age long thrill of the man hunt. They went silently. They passed by.

Smith took a long breath. He wanted neither to kill nor to be killed. Love of life was still strong within him, for all the ill favors life had of late bestowed upon him. There was a thrill too in being hunted. He smiled at the thought of eluding the confident sheriff.

THEY halted. His grip, which had relaxed upon his gun butts, tightened again. The sheriff was talking.

"There's a clift somewhere's up here on the east wall," he said. "That's what I'm lookin' fer. He come this way. Sign says that. An' he ain't sech a dummy as to ride across the pass. Dave Walsh told me 'bout the place. Leads up inter a park. You'd hardly think to travel it, he says. Choked with bresh an' plumb narrer. I reckon we ought to go inter any laterals we see. It ain't fur from here, from what Dave said. Somewheres above the double turn. Reckon we'd better turn back an' examine the one we jest passed. Two of you tackle it. We'll wait here. If it ain't a box I'll come an' look for sign."

"Hell, the back wall's less than thirty yards back! I saw it plain," said a man. "No sense in rummagin' in every holler we come to. Waste all day."

"You can't allus tell about them box cañons. They're liable to open up the last minute. You do as I tell you, Warner. I'm runnin' this posse. You an' Saunders make sure of it."

The sheriff's voice had an edge to it. He was not as young as he had been and the affair had got on his nerves.

"I ain't been sworn in," said Warner. "I volunteered. But if you're so cussed partickler, I'll oblige you. I don't want no one along. If that ain't a blind pocket I'll eat my Stetson." He rode back, muttering.

Smith knew him, owner of the B-W. He had been his friend. They had ridden roundup together, met at the rodeos and in town, visited each other's outfits, discussed stock and prices. Now he was at bay, and Warner would shoot on sight. There was nothing to do but make a dash for it and he pricked the dun and came flying out of the brush as Warner rode up, still grumbling. Warner's gun was holstered. Solo's right hand weapon was ready but he did not mean to use it unless he had to. He saw Warner's eyes open wide in an incredulous stare, he saw the four men higher up the cañon, turned in their saddles, waiting for the result of Warner's investigation.

Warner was game. He shouted, drove in his spurs and pulled his gun. The rest came clattering down, drawing and unsheathing weapons. For the time Warner blocked their fire. His gun spurted but the lead splashed the side wall; his Colt fell to the cañon floor as with an oath he hauled in his mount and clapped his left hand to his right elbow where Smith's bullet had gone through at the junction of the bones.

The dun went at headlong, breakneck speed about the first bend, with rifle bullets striking the rocks, spattering with a change of song as the granite of the cliff buttress stripped the steel jackets from the lead. If he faltered, tripped, threw a shoe—and Smith knew one was perilously thin—that was the end of both of them. The double turn gave them a chance to increase the lead and they made the most of it. Lightning held straight on, leaping the creek or splashing through it as it curved, hurdling loose bowlders, Solo high on his withers, out on his neck, calling to him.

The high and narrow place was filled with the reverberations of the rifles and six-guns. Solo was not firing back; all his energies were bent on riding and rendering himself as slight a target as possible. Misfortune still dogged him, it seemed. But no bullets hit him. It was difficult to shoot from the saddle while riding over that uncertain floor on horses restive from excitement and the explosions of the guns. When the cañon straightened Solo had increased his lead. If the posse had halted and fired from foot with careful aim they might have got him or the dun but, with the chase in sight, they were hot in pursuit. There were other posses below who might well hear the shooting and head Smith off.

He passed the place where he had entered the cañon earlier in the crowded day. The gorge widened, the trail was better, and Lightning proved his speed. There was another bend ahead and back of it Solo meant to turn aside, to reach a wide shelf of the mountain and ride for the spot he had selected. If he could get far enough in front he knew where he could swing off and leave no trace, let the sheriff cast about as he would; there would be three other apparent avenues of escape to muddle him. But Solo had to get out of sight to do it.

Now Lightning's gameness must count. A burst of speed round the bend might break his wind, though so far he showed no distress, but then there was a draw, half filled with slide and rubble, up which he must go over a pitch that few men would care to tackle—a tendon bowing, sinew cracking ascent to the shelf up the long chute where he would be a fair target for them if they sighted him. He would leave his trail, but he doubted if more than one horse out of ten could make the place. To go slowly would precipitate a series of landslips. The sheriff would essay it. The others might follow, leading their mounts but he might get the lead he wanted.

THE MEN behind had ceased shouting but their weapons were not yet emptied. A rock fragment spurted loose just above his head as he almost grazed the cliff at the turn. At the foot of the slide there was a detritus of soil and rock like an old ore heap. He checked Lightning and set him for it.

"Tough goin', hoss," he said, "but fer Gawd's sake make it! If you don't, we're cooked."

The dun did not hesitate. It cleared the detritus in a scramble, sending down loose stone, and then hurled itself at the slide, going up in a burst of leaps from powerful haunches. Solo felt the great plate muscles flex and unflex on the withers. He felt the surge of mighty quarters as the dun climbed like a wild goat among clouds of dust and loosened soil and rock that went avalancing down. Its breath came in great gasps, the cinchers lifted and fell slack under its lunges, the snakelike neck outstretched, head forward with nostrils gaping wide.

He was tiring fast when the top was in

sight, a welcome triangle of blue sky. A shot whined up through the dust, another and another as they made the rim and he saw the wide shelf running along the side of the mountain.

Solo drew the sobbing dun down to a walk, patting his sweaty neck and praising him. He could hear the men of the posse calling to one another as they started after him. The luck was breaking. Lightning was still good for the three miles necessary for escape; he was stained with dust and sweat; no one now would know him for dun or roan. Smith was powdered with the stuff, his face like a miller's, ears and nostrils plugged, but it looked as if he were going to get away.

The dun broke into a lope and Solo held him in for awhile. Soon he would have to let him out. They would be in plain sight for awhile until they turned the shoulder of the mountain. There the shelf faded out, with a deep rift to his right where Arrow Creek had its source; to the left, rising ground that shut out the valley where the range spurred out a great thrust that stretched far into the plain, a place with a score of hiding places where the posse might hunt till dark without trace in a maze of clefts and pockets.

He was nearing the narrow gap between the upmounting spur and the deep gorge when he heard the shout that proclaimed the posse had conquered the slide at last. They were a long way back. He glanced down at the flats for sky sign or other sign of posses watching the foot of the range and saw none, feeling exultant. The luck was turning. It would leave him outlawed but with his freedom.

There was a sudden ring to the shouts in the rear that checked his rising spirits. Coming toward him through the gap, in single file, so that he could not gauge their numbers, dust all about them, men were spurring. He was between two fires. The shelf dropped too steeply for any attempt at making down the mountain. Precipitous, impossible. To his right was the gorge. Its sides fell for three hundred feet to the bed of Arrow Creek. They overhung toward the top. He could not see the white water that rushed below in its narrow, choked channel.

On the other side the shelf continued for a little way, then the grade was thickly timbered. Back of him, nearer the beginning of the gorge and across it, the range was broken in a deep, wild glen of seamed and weathered rock into weird formation, limestone outcrop that had been lathed by the wind into a jungle of pinnacle and eroded shapes, trapped with fissures ranging far up the mountain, an impassable barrier. To its right was rough rim rock back to the cañon he had just come out of on the left—steep slopes thick with timber.

He gauged the jump. A crack athlete might have negotiated the space easily enough on a flat field, but here was a different matter for a half blown horse. The takeoff was uneven, treacherous with two smooth planes of rock. The farther wall was a little higher and cluttered with uneven ledges and a broken rampart of rock.

They had him—trapped. Not yet!

"If you balk or slip, hoss, we're goners," he whispered, leaning forward, his voice in the blue dun's ear that cocked gamely. "Jest as well fer me, mebbe, as bein' riddled. They might let you off."

HE WHEELED Lightning and rode back toward the edge of the shelf. Then he turned, patted the curving neck, giving rein, forbearing to use his spurs. If the dun made it he would do it himself, without urging.

From both sides the posses galloped in, wondering at his maneuver.

They saw the blue dun gathering speed at every leap, sparks struck from the flint by his steel shoes as he lengthened his stride, judging each bound. They saw him rise and soar above the crevasse, poised in mid air, hit the far side bunched on a narrow ledge; his tail, his buttocks, over the gorge as he gathered himself again and, almost in one superb, continuous motion, buck jump to the comparatively flat table rock and so race on to disappear in the timber before they realized that Solo Smith had eluded them. The trees covered him. After a crash or two he seemed to have found clear passage.

They joined forces in a wondering silence, their jaws slack, their eyes bulging.

"I'll be teetotally damned," said the deputy who had led the second posse, "if I ever see the like of that. More you look at it the wuss it seems. Look where he slid on them rocks at the take off an' landed on less than nothin'. Thet's one king hoss."

"His rider ain't so timid," said another. "Me, I wouldn't tackle a jump like that, if my hawss would look twice at it, not if there was six gallows rigged fer me an' the ropes danglin'. Sheriff, he's made his giterway an' I'm free to say he's earned it."

"Made it this time," said the sheriff curtly. "We can't git after him round the head of the gorge 'count of that malpais. Take an hour to work through it. Six miles down to the foot. We've got the pass watched an' we'll herd the foot of the range. He'll likely try to break out tonight an' hit the desert."

"You've got a sweet contract herdin' twenty mile of mountain."

The sheriff turned on the speaker.

"You talk like you was in sympathy with him," he said sourly.

"I don't know but what I am, after that jump. Me, I've been givin' up my time all day with a heap of work to do on the ranch. I ain't so keen on night wranglin'. It ain't as if Curley warn't goin' to git well. I ain't so damn' sure Smith robbed the stage, at that."

"I am," said the sheriff, "an' I'm goin' to land him for it."

The other grinned.

"I wish you luck, Sheriff. But that ain't my job. I got one of my own. I'm goin' back to it."

The sheriff frowned.

"I can swear you in," he said.

"An' I can swear back. You got plenty of help, I reckon. Lots of men willin' to draw depitty pay an' go man huntin'. Me, I've sort of lost enthusiasm."

He did not seem to be alone in his opinion. There were others who thought they had done all that might be asked of them though they did not as frankly express any admiration for Smith. Present pursuit was interrupted. The prospect of guarding the foothills and the desert border did not appeal to them. The sheriff shrugged his shoulders, resolute to go on with the hunt.

IT WAS ten days later when the sheriff drove in a buckboard into Calor and interviewed the postmaster.

There was a reward bill conspicuously posted, offering one thousand dollars for the apprehension or evidence leading to the apprehension of Samuel Smith, late of the Double S ranch, near Ventura. It was headed by an engraving of a picture taken from a group photograph which might have been recognized by any one familiar with the fugitive. The description was more accurate.

The sheriff frowned at it while the postmaster sorted mail behind closed windows, ignoring the representative of the civil law in favor of Federal business. At last he opened up and the sheriff thrust in a long envelope addressed to himself in his official capacity. It had been registered at Calor.

"You register this?" he demanded.

The other turned it over and over. He did not seem to like the sheriff's brusk request.

"I reckon I did. What of it?"

"Remember the man who brought it in?"

"Sure. Chap named Smalley. That's his name in the corner. I made him put it on."

"Know what was in the letter?"

The postmaster glared.

"Kind of steppin' outside your bailiwick, ain't ye?" he snapped. "You tryin' to suggest I open folk's mail?"

The sheriff tugged at his mustache.

He was upset, both with the receipt of the letter and the mention of the name Smalley.

"I didn't mean it theterway," he said. "You know this Smalley by sight?"

"Never laid eyes on him before or since. He came in at dusk night afore last an' handed in the letter plus the postage. I didn't take partickler notice of him. I ain't expected to take fingerprints of every one that sends registered mail."

"You didn't notice if he looked anything like the description of that placard with the thousand dollars reward, did you? Thet envelope held the cash, money orders an' checks that Solo Smith took from the stage. 'Pears to me like you left a thousand dollars slip through your fingers."

The postmaster came outside, adjusted his glasses and read the placard through.

"If he was brash enough to come inter Calor with that posted up here, you think he'd have waited till I got me a gun an' marched him inter our calaboose? A two gun man? They're callin' him 'Two Gun Smith' 'round here. Funny sort of a highwayman to turn back what he stole, to my way of thinkin'. You figger him conscience stricken?"

"I'm damned if I know how to figger it," said the sheriff. "I'm lookin' for him, an' when I git him I'll find out."

"Sounds reasonable, when you git him. Sheriff, I don't see much of a customer anyway through this winder. I can tell you though that he didn't wear no peacock neckerchief, nor no tie ring. I didn't see how tall he was nor how much he weighed. I warn't interested. If that was Two Gun Smith I sure admire his nerve. An' I don't jest see how I'd have connected with that reward. He was a pleasant spoken feller. Spoke real soft an' easy. Said his name was Smalley. Initial S. Anything else I can do fer you?"

"Not a thing."

The sheriff walked out confused. He was still after Smith but he meant to look up Smalley. He remembered him unfavorably. He had been relieved somewhat when the nester gambler left Ventura. That had been several days before the holdup.

He could not reconcile his idea of Smalley with the return of the loot. But, if it were Smith, why had he used Smalley's name? The recollection of the black handkerchief with eyeholes cut in it that he held in his safe came to him, bearing the initial that belonged to both men. A stock pattern.

"I'll have another talk with Edwards," he promised himself. "He was plumb positive about thet tie ring. As for the man that mailed this letter, if it was Smalley, he wouldn't have been wearin' it. If it was Smith, he'd have changed his clothes."

He was no wiser but more puzzled when he returned to Ventura. Nobody in Calor knew anything of Smalley.

Edwards, after being refused by Mary Sesnon in a definite manner that precluded any suggestion that she thought the proposal a compliment, had departed. After selling his holding and stock to the liveryman, he left over night for parts unknown by way of Phœnix. The sheriff had a fleeting wonder as to the coincidence of the affair's taking place while he was in Calor but he dismissed it. He could see no connection.

"Jest the same," he said to his chief deputy, "I'll land him yet."

"Which? Smith or Smalley?"

"Both, by thunder! Smith first."

The deputy uncrossed his legs, folded them again, bit off a fresh chaw.

"That looks to me," he drawled, "like a considerable proposition."

This is one of a series of Solo Smith stories. Look for the next one in an early issue.

By

KARL W. DETZER

The Flame Test

DEPUTY MARSHAL "SMALL JOHN" MORAN kicked back his chair when Pat O'Sullivan used the words "gutter rat" and jammed on his blue uniform cap.

"I'll give you a week to change your mind," he said sharply. "One week. Then I'll be over again. If you're inclined to show sense, we'll talk. If not . . ."

"And if not," demanded Engine Captain O'Sullivan. "And if not, then what?"

"Dog eat dog," answered the deputy marshal.

He stood glaring across at the older man. He was ten years younger than O'Sullivan, but in the fire department a dozen times as powerful. His ire left him as he remembered that significant fact. His small squinting eyes took in with their customary affability all the details of O'Sullivan's great, rangy, weather-beaten figure. It gratified Small John's pride to have authority over big men.

"Catch as catch can, Patrick," he advised. "There's ways of gettin' over a fence without goin' through the gate. Good day to you."

"Good day yourself, and may you starve o' lack o' food!" the engine captain shouted after him.

He heard Moran laugh as he ran down the stairs—a low, small sized laugh that matched the man and prophesied ill for Captain Patrick O'Sullivan's future in the fire business. The captain arose ponderously and dusted off the chair where Small John had been sitting. Twenty-odd years he had followed the smoky trade of the fire department, and never before needed to talk back to a chief.

As pipeman, squadman and ladderman, lieutenant and captain, he had plugged and fought and soaked down his way through every great fire in a quarter century. The Hibbard school tragedy, the stock yards beefhouse that had crashed on a chief of department and twenty fearless men, the Ottowa theatre, the Davenport railway offices — he'd scarred his lungs in all of them. Only two things in the whole hot business in its present status he couldn't endure: Muddy wheels on a pumper and this new deputy marshal.

He'd known Moran a long time, ever since Moran sold papers on the West Side, a noisy, impudent, half grown youngster with a habit of getting his own way. It was friendly police named him Small John. Pat was probationary pipeman then, stationed on Blue Island Avenue. He bought a paper from the boy every afternoon at five o'clock. He had been moved south and was serving as pipeman second class over in the stockyards district the year young Moran pulled himself upward, out of his gutter news-stand, into a respectable job in the city department of streets and alleys.

He heard Moran's name often after that, in political talk back in the old home ward, the "Bloody Nineteenth." Men said Small John could get a friend a job if there was a job to be had. Complimentary, most of the talk was, complimentary with a touch of awe. Captain Patrick was a ladderman awaiting his delayed lieutenancy, when a change of administration at the city hall brought alert, new faces to the waiting line of job seekers; and Small John Moran slipped into the fire department. Pat didn't think much about it one way or another at the time. But events were bound to rouse attention. Small John yanked hose enthusiastically for just one year. And became a lieutenant.

He admitted it was politics. But he claimed he was done with them. The department laughed, with poor humor. Done with politics when he'd made a lieutenancy in a year? Any number of good men worked ten. Politics were supposed to be out of the fire department, but every now and again, by some bewildering circumstance, a politician slipped into the lower ranks and soon was detected climbing upward. The civil service board, Pat explained loyally to his own crew, is composed of humans and can not at all times function unerringly and with heavenly wisdom.

Small John served three years as lieutenant. Then his trim little figure suddenly appeared in the double bugles of company commander. His old friends began to pop up in the fire department regularly after that, neighbors and political allies of the Bloody Nineteenth. Even Pat O'Sullivan, with his great faith in the integrity of the department, admitted then it was politics; politics was responsible, one New Year's day, when the double bugles on Moran's cap crossed themselves and became the insignia of a battalion chief.

Only politics again, after nine years in the department, nine years a good deal less conspicuous for efficient fire fighting than Patrick O'Sullivan's own, could make Small John Moran, on another New Year's day, eighth deputy marshal.

ON THE second day of that same January, Captain Patrick O'Sullivan had filed charges against his senior pipeman, Jim Casey, charging disobedience, drunkenness, ineptitude, disorderly conduct, neglect of duty, absence without leave, disrespect to his superior officer, and conduct unbecoming a fireman. Captain Patrick was no believer in half measures. But it happened that he had forgotten Jim Casey lived in the nineteenth ward until Moran walked in his door.

He remembered it as soon as he saw the new deputy marshal; knew at once the purpose of his visit. He had come to reason with Captain O'Sullivan, to urge the reinstatement of Pipeman Casey (the Caseys numbered thirty-nine votes in the Bloody Nineteenth), and if necessary to use the suggestive force that made him a power at the city hall. The captain listened a little restlessly to his chief's proposition; when he thought the man was through, he arose quietly and opened the door.

Small John understood. He looked slightly startled for a moment. But after gazing reflectively at his own neat shoes he lighted a cigar.

"As I was saying," he went on calmly, "I advise you—"

Wrath flashed across O'Sullivan's lean hard face.

"I'll withdraw no charges, sir," he said. "You'll have the kindness to get out o' my sight afore I've took sick from looking at you."

Unruffled, Small John puffed twice.

"You got a game knee," he reminded Captain O'Sullivan affably. "Makes it hard for you to get around. Last time you fell down, there on the sidewalk in front of that pants shop, I just picked you up and said nothing. But, if you show no sense, along with physical disability—" again he puffed on the cigar.

"It's a threat?" asked Captain Patrick.

"Take it or leave it," suggested the deputy marshal. "I think you'll find my advice good enough to follow."

"You'll fry!" shouted Patrick O'Sullivan. "By the holy hydrants, you filthy little gutter rat, you can fry!"

IT WAS his political sense that made Small John give the captain another chance. He left the room victor, and was aware of it. Below, where they stood listening about the alarm stand, he greeted affably the crew of Engine 71. In the middle of the floor—built originally for steam engine and hose wagon and therefore too wide by ten feet for present uses—stood the resplendent crimson pumper.

Its polished surface, its nickel and brass and steel, reflected brilliantly the snowy morning light that leaped through the small panes in the upper halves of the broad front doors. Like a thing alive it crouched above its drip pans, awaiting the preemptory voice of the telegraph key, or the shrill, insistent demand of the box alarm bell.

"Well, boys," said Small John cordially, "how they treating you? Good? That's fine. Where's Terry Byrne?"

"Back in the kitchen, sir," a pipeman answered. His voice was respectful.

"I'll go see him," said the deputy marshal.

The man he sought was slicing potatoes into a kettle on the gas stove. He was young and dark-Irish of face. Over his blue uniform he wore a soiled apron.

"And what you doing here, Terry?" asked the deputy marshal.

"I'm cook," said Byrne soberly. "The Old Man assigned me." He dropped a potato clumsily to the floor, picked it up and held it under a running faucet in the sink. "He's a tough boss."

"So? Boys dissatisfied?"

"Oh no, sir. He's hard. But we kind of like him. He's independent."

"All of that," agreed Small John. "How's his knee?"

"Which knee?"

"The game one. Look to yourself, Terry, if you want to get on in the world. Your boss has a game knee that would send him on pension and out of the way was we to put our mind to it. You never noticed him limping?"

"I never."

"And he's got you peeling spuds. That wasn't what I put you into the department for, Terry. You was to be a fireman."

Byrne grinned.

"That's right, sir. We got to eat though. It's a good job, all things considered."

"Oh, sure. Sure it's a good job. And you're smart." The deputy marshal lowered his voice. "I'm going to keep my eye open for you, Terry. May need a driver pretty soon. Drivers for deputy marshals get to know the ropes. Make good lieutenants. How long you been in?"

"Nine months."

Byrne splashed the last potato into the boiling water. He was worried a little by what Small John was saying. It led to something, he couldn't tell what.

"Nine months," the deputy marshal repeated. "Some men go a long ways in nine months. Think you'd like being driver?" he persisted.

Forward in the apparatus room the steel jaws of the joker alarm snapped out a curt message, three short fives, pause, a two and a one. Small John listened.

"South side o' the retail district," he said. "Engine 21, that's the niggers goin' out." He turned back to Terry. "Ought to go a long ways in nine months," he repeated.

Five . . . five . . . five . . . pause . . . three, one, nine . . . . pause . . . five, five, five . . . pause . . . five . . . one . . . one.

Truck 9 and Squad 1 were following Engine 21 on a telephone alarm.

"Nothing to get excited about yet," Small John said. He called through the open door to the apparatus room. "Where they roll, boys?"

"River and First street," answered a pipeman who hung the telephone receiver upon its hook and at once stepped backward, squinted at the wall clock and upon a small dusty blackboard inscribed the cryptic report of the summons, together with its time. The joker had spoken at twenty-two minutes after nine.

Small John returned to the kitchen.

"A bad knee, and a shame it is," he sighed. "That's the trouble with getting old, Terry my boy. Rheumatics and a bad disposition go hand in fist, and the taxpayers don't get their money's worth. Now look here—" again he lowered his voice—"these charges against Casey—you heard about 'em? The Old Man's got you for witness up before the trial board. As I hear the story, Casey wasn't drunk exactly, wasn't insubordinate either. O'Sullivan simply got on his nerves. Small wonder. Casey'd stood as much as a decent man ought, 'fore he fired back. That was the way, was it?"

He looked up innocently into young Terry Bryne's perplexed face.

"Why—yes. I've seen Casey drunker a lot of times than he was that morning."

"You'd be a poor hand in court," said the marshal. "Can't answer a straight question. It was this I asked: Was he drunk or wasn't he? I saw him that very day. I say not. I'm your friend, which you know. The trial board will be asking the same question, and they're no man's friend. You like Casey. He's a good egg, and if he's got a bit under his belt that's too bad. The best of us make mistakes. I hope you follow me, Terry, for I've got your own good at heart."

Terry Byrne nodded confusedly.

"So, was the board to ask you did poor Casey have any excuse for talking back, you tell your story how it was. How the Old Man devils and dogs his crew. You might mention how he falls down, unexpected, account of his game leg. I suppose he's had it in special for Casey? The poor lad's been up for promotion; these charges'll put that off six months! Well, there's others beside O'Sullivan can command Engine 71."

Absentmindedly he passed Byrne a cigar. The pipeman accepted it.

"You're planning to run the Old Man out?" he demanded bluntly.

The new deputy marshal shrugged.

"You've a brutal way of saying things, Terry. It never pays to be too black and white with our speech. That's poor politics and it's poor fire business talk. I'm planning no such thing, but if he hangs himself I've give him fair warning and it's no lookout of mine. You use your head. You'll have questions to answer. And remember, Terry, Small John's your friend."

"Yes, sir."

"And should the Old Man take it into his head to tumble on his bad knee, keep your eyes open, Terry."

The deputy marshal departed breezily from the kitchen. At the alarm stand in the apparatus room he halted, inquired solicitously again after the health of the crew and was starting toward the curb where his great red car awaited him when the box alarm instrument uttered a sharp command. In its oblong glass case it pounded a short steel finger, there was a whirr of small wheels, the white paper ribbon began to cascade over the edge of the oaken board and a shrill little bell sang out an imperative summons.

One . . . three . . . five . . . Repeated four times.

"It's Engine 21 pulled that box," said

the deputy marshal. "Whatever they got's too big for them to handle by themself. They're wanting help."

He closed the door after him and crossed the sidewalk to the car.

ALONE in the kitchen Terry Byrne stared at the cigar in his hand. True, he owed a lot to the new deputy marshal. It was Small John who first suggested the fire department to him. It was Small John who fixed up the papers for his application. Again it was Small John who pushed those papers through the clogged channels of departmental routine and speeded his appointment by six months. And now he offered him a job as driver as soon as a vacancy occurred. And talked of a lieutenancy.

An important friend for any young man in the fire business, was Small John Moran. A good friend indeed. Only . . .

Funny he'd never noticed the captain's game knee. O'Sullivan always seemed to get around all right when there was work to do. A strict disciplinarian, a hard company officer, unreasonable as a traffic cop, disagreeable sometimes, bulldozing, a regular slave driver—but never a sign of a limp.

The box alarm instrument began to spit out orders.

One . . . three . . . five . . . pause. Four . . . . eleven . . . pause. One . . . three . . . five!

"A four bagger!" a man shouted in the apparatus room.

Terry put the cigar out of sight in his pocket and ran, forgetting his apron. He saw the great lank frame of Captain O'Sullivan twisted like a gorilla around the sliding pole, shoot down the polished brass from the second floor. Pipeman Myers, second in command in the absence of the suspended Casey, held the flimsy ticker tape in his broad hands and counted the round holes punched in a staggered row down its center.

"Where at?" bellowed Captain O'Sullivan. "We roll?"

"Not this time! Came in from Box 135."

"Twenty-one and Truck 9 went out on a still," Driver Emery put in. "They pulled the box. Three minutes ago."

"Three minutes? The four bagger come in right on top of it?" O'Sullivan took the tape from Myers' fingers. He did not wait for an answer to his question. Glancing sharply at the faces of his men, he demanded, "Where's Moran?"

"Gone."

"Just gone? I see his car long after he come down stairs! What was he doin'?"

There was an awkward pause; then young John Finney spoke up.

"He wanted Terry."

O'Sullivan turned slowly and peered at Terry Byrne.

"What he want o' you?"

"Nothing, sir."

O'Sullivan scowled.

"Nor do I. That's a disrespectful answer you made me, young man. Get back to the kitchen!"

He returned abruptly to the alarm stand. The rattle of the four-eleven had ceased. Three quick steps brought the engine commander to the polished oak board, with its nickel and brass recording instruments, its glass cased box alarm, its black telephone and its card index file of alarm station locations.

"We're like to be yanked out if there's a special," he growled. "Change o' quarters anyhow. Best get into your bunkers, men. And sweaters and jerkins. It's blasted cold. Hear me?"

The crew galloped for the stairway. Only Terry Byrne, his dark eyes flashing with anger, did not move. He stood midway to the kitchen door, swallowing hard and glaring at his captain. Back to the kitchen, eh? Because the eighth deputy marshal stopped in to talk over private affairs? The eighth deputy, to whom he owed his appointment and who promised his future?

He stood uncertainly while Captain O'Sullivan, having put on his spectacles, thumbed the cards of the "running file" and glanced apprehensively at the clock, then at the pole holes in the ceiling. Almost at once a pair of rubber boots appeared in one of the holes. Driver

Emery, already dressed for heavy duty, shot through to the floor.

"Bring me own bunkers, somebody, when you come," O'Sullivan shouted.

It was Cox, a bent, coughing little man who retained neither youth nor ambition, who ran down the stairway with the captain's rubber clothes. O'Sullivan leaned against the alarm stand, untied his shoes, kicked them off and pulled the combination rubber boots and breeches up his long legs. He fastened them with a snap at the waist. His arms pawed through the sleeves of his sweater. By the time the others had returned he was buckling the front of his slicker. Then he saw Terry Byrne.

"Well?" he asked sharply. "Are you a blasted statue or something? Bunkers, I said!"

"You told me to go to the kitchen," Byrne replied.

Only the veins of Captain Patrick's forehead moved. These bulged out twice.

"Very well, then. I take back that order. Get your boots."

He swung about to the desk immediately, without waiting for Byrne to speak; only as the pipeman fled, ill at ease, for the stairway, his commander looked once more at his back, a sharp short stare, incandescent with anger. This was the first trouble he ever had had with Byrne. He blamed Small John Moran instinctively; remembered in a flash that Byrne as well as Casey came from the nineteenth ward.

Young Terry dropped his apron on a chair as he ran. He had drawn on his boots in the big room upstairs when he heard the box alarm instrument sputter into action. One . . . three . . . five. . . . Then ten staccato taps, the first special alarm. Calls for engine and truck companies, ten more pumpers, four or five new ladder trucks, additional flying squadrons and police reserves.

Byrne ran to the pole where it thrust up into the sleeping quarters. As he clamped his arms around it he heard the autocratic little bell summoning another engine—92, this time. Then Engine 18, then 69, then 41. Calls were coming in fast! He landed heavily on the apparatus room floor. Driver Emery already was in place on the seat of the pumper, his helmet atop his head, one hand on the ignition key, the other gripping the wheel. Myers, Cox, Finney and Goldman stood with their toes toward the pumper, necks twisted, eyes on Captain O'Sullivan's broad back as he bent over the alarm stand. Only the quick intake of men's breath and the sharp voice of the instrument broke the uneasy silence.

Engine 71! A stutter of seven dots, and a single *ping!*

"Go!" O'Sullivan roared. "Roll! Go!"

THE MOTOR thundered. Emery reached upward with his left hand, a spasmodic motion, and jerked the rope that released the swinging doors. Cox and Goldman leaped to their places on the tailboard. Finney slipped as he scrambled atop the hose box, recovered his balance hastily and wrapped his feet about the roof ladder that tilted above the fabric line. Myers swung to the right fender board. As Terry reached for the left, he saw Captain O'Sullivan plunge from the alarm stand. The ticker tape fluttered out of his hand. He took one long quick step.

His chin jerked back suddenly. His wide hands flew up, at the ends of his long thin arms. His right foot poised a second in the air. His left knee wobbled, bent, twisted and he crashed to the floor. He went down yelling, a great, fierce bellow that erupted hot as molten metal from his lips. A scream of fury and of pain.

"Go!" he commanded, when Terry Byrne, Goldman and Cox leaped to the floor to help him. "Go without me! Leave me alone! Take command, Myers."

"Give me a lift on him," said Cox shortly.

Six hands dragged the captain from the floor. They boosted him upward to the vacant seat by the driver. Terry found himself helping without consciously willing to do so. He saw Cox lean down and twist sharply on the captain's knee, while sweat poured suddenly from O'Sullivan's face.

"That's it," he grunted, "I'm right now. Go! Roll, men! Would you wait all day? Go!"

The crew leaped once more to their places. Captain O'Sullivan, his teeth set, sweat still dripping from his face, gave the bell rope a savage yank. The motor roared. Engine 71, forty seconds late, thundered out of the wide doors, swung sharply to the right and charged.

Snow, packed into ridges at the sides of the street car tracks, gripped the tires. The wheels spun.

"Push 'er!" O'Sullivan commanded.

Driver Emery advanced his throttle a notch. The bell racketed excitedly. The motor hummed. Engine 71, a flash of polished nickel and steel and brass and crimson paint, plunged across the white snow, southward bound.

On the left hand fender board, Terry Byrne clung breathlessly to the hand grips and watched his commanding officer. He was still resentful. So the Old Man had gone down! Small John was right. Patrick O'Sullivan had a bad knee as well as a bad temper. Why had they helped him up? Why hadn't they left him there on the floor of the engine-house, for the pension board to examine when the time came? Why? Terry hardly knew why. But he appreciated, vaguely, that it would have been what Small John called good politics. And that it would have put Pipeman Terry Byrne in better grace than ever with the political power of the Bloody Nineteenth.

The engine jerked sharply to the right under Emery's skilful hands. Snow had been cleaned from this street. The sooty, utilitarian fronts of tall brick lofts looked down from their drab height at the glamorous, noisy passage of crimson and sounding brass. Again Emery turned, to the left this time. It was straightaway now, right through the business district. A traffic policeman, astride his chestnut mount, was charging ahead of the engine, his horse at a gallop, whistle screaming in his lips, one white glove raised commandingly.

Terry, where he clung to the hand grips, could see the captain's grim, drawn mouth as the engine careened forward, his old, squinting eyes. Anger, pity and confusion struggled in the younger man's mind. Anger at O'Sullivan's unreasoning temper and his stiff necked discipline, pity for his threatened retirement; confusion over Small John's visit, his advice that had the sting of command in it, his determination to protect Jim Casey at the expense of an officer. Casey *had* been drunk, he had been disrespectful; no mistaking that. And Captain O'Sullivan *had* fallen down; no denying that, either, if a trial board asked.

ENGINE 71 ploughed through low-hanging smoke. Other pumpers were rumbling south with a hearty clatter of bells. A lean, lank greyhound of a ladder truck slid out of a cross street and stretched into a quicker pace.

Captain O'Sullivan turned once and looked back at his crew. Terry ducked his helmet. He did not want to meet O'Sullivan's eyes just yet. When he glanced up again Captain Patrick was jerking the bell rope savagely. Smoke had thickened; it spread out now in gray, cottony layers upon the pavement. New sounds broke through the uproar of the speeding motor, a rich full-throated grumble, the chorus of a score of pumping engines already at work. Terry eased the two-foot nozzle from its peg, ready for action. He saw Goldman lean toward the hose box that same instant and loosen the strap from the hard rubber suction pipe; saw wheezy little Cox pull the brass coupling at the free end of the hose.

The brakes squealed. The great body of the car swung violently to the right and brought up short against the curb. Captain O'Sullivan stretched his left leg cautiously, then kicked out his foot. His face betrayed the wrench of pain as he did so. Ignoring it, he scrambled down the step.

"Couple suction!" he commanded. "Couple and lay out. Pull eight section. I'll tell you when to break. Got to report first—"

He ran out of sight across the pavement at an ungainly, hobbling pace. Terry, yanking hose from the box, looked over the crimson hood at the street ahead. Apparatus already clogged the thoroughfare. Hose wound in black, wet, serpentine lengths on the muddy cobbles. Smoke lay in dirty layers above the sidewalks.

Higher, a full block away, a monstrous black puffing column arose into the clean sunny winter sky. It lifted from the top of a broad, four story brick structure that spread along a hundred yards of front. Lesser black clouds, like the inverted tails of tornadoes, spiraled out of second and third story windows. Terry recognized the building. A mail order tailor shop. Two ladder trucks already were in position in the street, extended to the roof. The gooseneck snout of a water tower was poking upward with jerky, ungainly antics, while men twisted the windlass at its base. The deluge set of a high pressure turret wagon stood solidly between the double car tracks, pouring a gigantic white stream into fourth floor windows.

Shrill voices broke across the noisy exertions of heavy engines, voices issuing short commands, demanding orders.

Captain O'Sullivan's limp was more pronounced as he panted back.

"Eight section and break!" he bellowed. "Lead off! One inch tip!"

Cox and Myers grasped the nozzle. Terry Byrne fell in behind them. At the first coupling Goldman picked up the fabric. Kinney waited, expectantly, till a hundred feet of limp line had dragged past him, then ran with the second coupling. Driver Emery already had connected the suction pipe with curbstone hydrant and the pumper's intake. He stood now beside his idling engine, left hand on the watergate, right holding open the flap of the hood.

Terry saw his captain twenty paces ahead. He was making good time in spite of his limp. Smoke thickened. The clear light of the winter morning fled from the street. Suddenly a familiar voice commanded—

"You, O'Sullivan, 'round and up the rear!"

Terry paused involuntarily; looked up, and immediately away. It was Small John shouting. Eighth Battalion Chief Moran. He was standing by the curb—it seemed he was almost forgetful of the fire—watching O'Sullivan's limp.

"Aye!" O'Sullivan answered.

"Truck 7's got their Bangor ladder raised in the alley," Small John cried. "Get up there—fourth floor—in at it, and stick!"

Heat kicked out of basement gratings as Terry swung into the alley; heat and a breathless choking dust, burnt acid air, the hot smell of smoke, a raw odor of charring cloth.

"Are you dead or something?" Captain O'Sullivan addressed no one in particular. "Get a step on you!"

He ran awkwardly. His knee still pained him. No doubt about it. Small John knew it. And bade him climb a ladder . . .

Terry spoke aloud:

"A ladder? He can't climb! He'll smash—" He dropped the line and ran forward impulsively. "Hey, Captain! You won't need come up—we can handle it!"

"Me?" Captain O'Sullivan paused with one foot on the lower rung of the Bangor ladder. His great lean face reddened. "Me?" he repeated. "Stay down?"

"Your leg—" Terry faltered. He had made a mistake.

"Get to your place afore I take a spanner to you!" the captain bellowed. "I'll file charges—"

He began climbing heavily. Byrne, smarting anew, dropped back angrily to his position on the hose. The rebuke was unjustified this time. He had offered help, and been scorned for it. He'd never tasted the O'Sullivan temper fully before. Nine months had shown nothing like this! No wonder Jim Casey rebelled.

O'Sullivan was ten feet off the ground now, clinging tight to the uprights of the ladder. His left foot dragged appreciably. Myers, in second place, carried the nozzle over his right shoulder. Cox, at his heels, yanked hose. It was Terry's turn to start. He twisted his hose strap around the first coupling, tested it, felt its weight on his shoulders and went up hand over hand. Let the Old Man fall if he insisted upon it! Go up before the pension board tomorrow! He'd testify against him all right. Swear to anything Small John wanted. Plenty of other men, good men, could captain Engine 71.

He lifted his feet carefully. A new company was setting up a high pressure tripod in the alley behind him, ready to siamese two lines together and pour their combined force into a lower window. Smoke churned from the rear doors. It was blue and gray in color, piling out slowly. No draft behind it, that indicated. Above, where smashed windows fed clear air to the fire, yellow clouds spit out excitedly. It was hotter smoke up there at the top. Engine 71 had to go through it.

The captain's heels kicked out awkwardly, far above in the thick gassy air; still climbing, still hobbling upward. Upward through smoke. Terry lost sight of him at last. First O'Sullivan, then Myers, disappeared beyond the hot rushing clouds. Then Fox. Terry breathed deeply, pulled his lips tight shut, squinted his eyes and climbed. Like scalding water, this smoke. Three, five, seven rungs . . . ten . . . twelve . . . it was unmercifully hot. He opened his eyes in a narrow slit. He was through the worst of it. A half dozen rungs and he'd be there . . . .

He saw Fox's rubber boots disappearing through a fourth floor window just above him. The hose flapped after them. Terry yanked on the section he was carrying. His gloves found the sill. There was little smoke in the window, surprisingly little heat. The fire had not reached this floor yet, either had not reached it or was boring straight through it to a ventilated roof in some other corner of the building.

Within, in the semi-darkness, he heard Captain O'Sullivan's voice, pitched sharp in command, and Fox and Myers answering him. Terry dropped in to the floor and gave the hose another yank.

"This way, men—bring that line! In, Byrne?"

"Yes, sir!"

"In, Goldman?"

"Sure!"

"Bring the line!" O'Sullivan repeated. His voice choked.

Terry staggered forward, pulling the limp hose. He heard Kinney gasp as he sprawled through the window. Fox and Myers were charging ahead with the brass nozzle down a long, crowded room hazy with smoke. There were three lines of tables, stacked with bolts of cloth. A stock room. Orders were never to spill much water in a stock room; wet cloth weighted down the floor.

Captain O'Sullivan crouched before a door at the end of the room, his hand on the knob.

"Hallway out here full of fire," he cried. "Holler down that ladder, tell Emery we're ready for water!"

From the window Kinney screamed—

"Engine 71, charge the line!"

Voices in the alley took up the cry. Air hissed in the pipe tip. The hose moved as if alive, bending its kinks into rounded contours. Captain O'Sullivan jerked open the door.

FLAME, smoke and blistering air kicked in from the hall. O'Sullivan, crawling forward on the floor with the tip of the hose pipe in his gloves, pulled his neck down into his rubber coat; bade Myers opposite him drop to his knees. Terry eased down behind Fox just as the first muddy water churned out of the tip.

Fire roared defiantly through the door. Headlong water met it. A sudden black thickening smoke pressed into the room, enveloping the men's heads, pinching shut their eyes. The white stream left a wet steaming black track on walls, floor and ceiling. Spray pushed out into the faces of the crew of 71, burned like drops of hot lead.

"Up a bit. Don't lean back," commanded O'Sullivan.

Terry saw him hitch forward, dragging his hurt leg. Spunk! In spite of his temper the captain had spunk! Like a regiment of artillery he was fighting back the fire, battling it face to face, giving not an inch, crawling forward, forcing the fight.

The stream smashed out of the one inch tip, four hundred . . . five hundred . . . six hundred . . seven hundred impetuous gallons a minute. The fabric line throbbed with the distant labor of the pumper. The pipe wrenched in the hands that held it.

"Up a bit," ordered the captain.

The crew hitched ahead six inches.

"A bit more. We'll be hittin' it right another minute!"

Terry saw fire retreat before the ferocious onslaught of water. Heat, slashing over O'Sullivan's head, bit at his face. It must be unbearable up there where the captain crouched. On elbows and knees, astride the hose, Terry hitched forward.

The stiff white column spurted exultantly from the nozzle tip, beating in successive waves, like fresh shock troops against an old, implacable enemy. Smoke, in a sickening mass, poured over the tight group about the brass pipe. Captain O'Sullivan, his long frame sprawled in the hot dirty water on the floor, was growling unemotionally, urging, cajoling, berating his men in a low hoarse voice.

"Move up!" he commanded.

Overhead upon the tin roof sounded the beat of axes. Ladder companies were boring holes in the top, to let out smoke, to coax the flame into channels where water and skill might more easily overpower it. Somewhere far forward a mighty thunder told of other companies driving their streams. The floor under Terry's knees was getting hot. Must be fire close by. Uncomfortably close. If they only had a moment they could cut a hole here, might drown it out underneath. A crash sounded below. Some partition burning away?

"Ten foot more and we'll hit that blasted elevator shaft!"

It was O'Sullivan again. Fox, leaning back against Terry Byrne's boots, groaned and struggled to his knees. Myers pulled, grimly silent, on the stiff, unyielding hose. Goldman, in the doorway behind Terry, eased the line around a bend. Kinney was coughing, still farther back. Ten feet more. Could they make it? Terry heard O'Sullivan belaboring the two men at the pipe. Ten feet! No man could live ten feet farther on. But the hose moved ahead.

Heat, slashing along the corridor, burned Terry's throat, wilted the hair under his helmet, set his eyebrows to crawling like worms, baked his brain. Rebelliously he hitched forward. O'Sullivan was a man killer to go any farther! A dogging, bulldozing, ungrateful man-killer! He was about through leading Engine 71, wasn't he? Terry tried to shout, to chide O'Sullivan, tell him that men could not stand such punishment. The warning burned in his throat.

"We're knockin' her out!" the captain roared. "Up a bit!"

Flame retreated in the face of his words. Left and right, up and down, water washed back the fire, seven hundred gallons a minute, bursting out of the nozzle. Smoke, in horrible, stifling clouds, erupted into the passage. The hose moved forward.

Terry moved with it. Spunk, this captain had. In spite of Small John. Small John, the new eighth deputy. Where was he? In the street most likely. Safe. Sending other men in. . .

"Here, 71!"

A man was crawling up from behind. A small figure in a white helmet, with a familiar voice. He was calling again.

"You, O'Sullivan!"

Moran!

He pulled his light body easily along the floor. When his boots below his steaming white slicker reached Terry's head, they stopped. His voice, pitching up shrilly to overcome the obstinate clamor of the fire, reached back to Terry's ears.

"Leave three or four o' your men, leave 'em here. You come down, O'Sullivan, get a second line!"

"Second line?" the captain demanded. "Leave this? I'm just knocking it!"

"Down! Bring two men with you! Truck 18 is layin' a second line. You fetch it up!"

Small John backed away swiftly as soon as he gave the order. A moment Patrick O'Sullivan lay motionless. Then Terry heard command of the line pass to Myers. The captain was obeying. Obeying Small John. Yielding his own line, with the elevator shaft just in sight. It was poor fire fighting judgment to yank him down at this point. Even he, Terry Byrne, in the department nine months, knew that much. Small John could have let the truck company bring up that line. Instead he sent O'Sullivan fumbling down the ladder. Down and up again. With half a crew left to handle hose. Half a crew, and the captain climbing with a game knee.

"Come along, you!"

O'Sullivan's order was directed at him. It was repeated as they crawled past Finney. The Old Man was taking his recruits, leaving his veterans. Terry staggered blindly after him. There was less heat in the stock room. Less heat and more smoke. Acid fumes caught Terry's throat, gagged him, threatened to stifle him before he reached the window. There, by the fresher air, Small John was waiting, one boot thrown over the sill.

"Go get it," he commanded. "They're lugging it up now."

Captain O'Sullivan, towering a head above Small John, slid boldly to the ladder and started downward. Terry followed. As he passed the sill where Small John leaned out, gasping in the fresh cool air, the deputy marshal said—

"How's things?"

Terry tried to answer. His voice failed. He shook his head.

"Old Man holding out all right?"

Terry managed to nod. He felt Kinney's knees crowding him in careful descent. Over to the left flame spouted through broken glass. Fire was eating its way topward there, in spite of the water Engine 71 was throwing. At the ground O'Sullivan growled, "Give me a lift," and started up at once with the second nozzle. Terry's hands fumbled as he hooked his hose strap to the first section.

Twice on the way back to the top he saw the captain sway, grip tight to the ladder and wait. Then crawl on. The smoke that had blown through the rungs on the first climb was deflected by now; only occasional gusts of hot air slapped past their faces. But fire roared greedily through windows to the left. It colored the column of smoke pouring out of the top of the building. Less smoke—more flame.

A HALF-DOZEN companies fought now from fire escapes at second and third floor windows. Others along the opposite roofs bent their tips downward, raking third floor and fourth. Five fat lines coiled into the wide doors on the loading platform along the alley. Terry looked up dizzily. He saw his captain's unsteady feet feeling for each rung as he climbed. His right shoulder bent with the weight of the pipe. Doggedly he kept on. Terry bit his blistered lips and followed. If O'Sullivan could make it, O'Sullivan with a game knee, certainly *he* could! Once, as he glanced down, he saw Finney's scorched, crimson face looking up, with agony written on it. He was halfway to the top now . . . two thirds. O'Sullivan sprawled into the window.

As Terry's elbows poked over the sill he heard voices.

"Been waiting here to help," Small John was saying. "Too bad about your leg."

"You'll keep hands off," O'Sullivan answered.

"You got to have help," the deputy marshal insisted. "You're too lame—"

O'Sullivan growled. Moran's hands were reaching for the line as Terry swung into the window. He had advanced a dozen steps across the hot floor when he heard a new, sharp, ripping noise. He felt the floor jerk under his unsteady feet.

The captain had just yelled:

"Water! Charge line!"

Terry repeated the cry. He heard Finney take it up, outside, on the top rungs of the ladder.

The floor swayed more violently. The ripping noise swelled in a startling crescendo. O'Sullivan shouted—

"Steady!"

"Run!" Small John echoed.

A table loaded with bolts of cloth spilled crazily. A partition shook off its plaster. The floor tilted like the deck of a beating ship. Its boards ripped apart, midway to the hall door, and flame broke through from below. Flame and a ghastly, unbearable heat.

The hose line on Terry's shoulder jerked with quick life. More water was on its way. Smoke swirled about his head and packed into his throat like dry wool.

"Run!" Small John was repeating.

"Stick!" O'Sullivan contradicted.

Terry hesitated. Moran ploughed into him as he turned toward the open window. The two of them sprawled. The hose fattened, kicked out and threw them apart.

"A hand, you!" O'Sullivan bawled.

The floor sloped in two parts, upward at a sickening angle from the roaring crevasse now choked with flame. Terry moved indecisively. His foot tripped on a line; a fat, throbbing line that his squinting eyes saw for the first time, and suddenly he remembered. It was his own line. Engine 71's. It led to his mates out there in the hall on the other side of this blazing chasm.

"A hand, Moran!" O'Sullivan begged.

"Start down, you fool! Down!"

O'Sullivan, lying upon his nozzle, held it tight while water spurted out of its wide tip. He reached back awkwardly, with a sweeping gesture. His great hand searched for Small John's rubber collar. Found it. Clamped tight. It yanked forward and Small John followed, kicking, shouting incoherently.

The eighth deputy marshal thumped down atop the hose.

"Our boys is in ahead!" O'Sullivan roared. "We got to get 'em out! You, Byrne! Finney! A hand!"

Small John's head lifted protestingly once. The captain pushed it back.

"Do your share on that line!" he commanded.

The captain lifted the tip and aimed, while the tilting floor threatened to collapse under its weight.

"Take it easy," he whispered to his men.

Terry, opposite him, heard a whine of protest once. Small John again, begging to start down. Terry did not turn his head. So this was Small John, eh? The eighth deputy marshal! The man who'd been in the department nine years? Terry winced. Words echoed shamefully in his ears. Just this morning, this same hideous morning, Small John had bragged about it, had tried to tempt him. . . . "Some men go a long ways in nine months!"

Nine months! Terry saw the whole thing straight now. Small John Moran was crooked. He wanted to pension Pat O'Sullivan because he was honest—Pat O'Sullivan, who'd been learning for twenty years how to fight fire, who wouldn't leave his crew. . .

"Easy!" O'Sullivan whispered.

Terry came back with a jolt to the horrible present. Water bored a black path along the floor. Oily smoke rolled up, the blaze parted, leaped together stubbornly, again parted. One stream couldn't do anything against that howling furnace.

One stream? But now there were two. Three blistered firemen were crouching in the hall door, on the opposite side of the broken floor. Myers and Cox and Goldman. Trying to escape. Their nozzle, drilling a wet path into the crevasse, met water from the other hose. Two streams! They might beat it now!

"Give me a hand, Moran," O'Sullivan ordered, "afore I spill you down into it!"

Small John did not move. The older man reached back gently with his uninjured leg and pushed his superior's weight off the line. Twenty feet separated the detached units of Engine 71. Eighteen feet. Terry's head was spinning. Were they drowning it out? Myers seemed to be advancing, there on the other side. He was twelve feet away. With the hole between. Smoke sickness gripped Byrne by the throat. Eight feet. Six.

"Shut off your pipe!" O'Sullivan commanded. "You Myers, shut her off!" Like a maniac he howled the words, as if his voice never had been plagued by smoke. "Shut her off, jump for it, boys!"

Goldman leaped first. Then Cox. Then Myers. The crew of Engine 71 was reunited.

"Drag that there line! Here's an elegant place to hit her!" the captain ordered. "We'll beat her back from here."

"Moran!" a man bellowed from the window.

Terry knew the voice. The chief of department!

"Come down!"

"Aye, sir," Captain O'Sullivan answered. "Out, boys. You, Small John! Do I got to lug you?"

The crew of Engine 71 retired slowly to the window. Their borrowed line beat vigorously, in reluctant retreat. The chief of department, clinging to the top of the ladder, stared unbelievingly through the smoke. Captain O'Sullivan was dragging Small John.

"What you got there?"

"A politician," answered the captain. "I'll take him down."

TWENTY minutes later, Engine 71, reorganized, was pouring water from a roof across the alley. At noon, when open flame was conquered, Captain O'Sullivan was ordered to roll up his hose.

"The chief wants you," a lieutenant from headquarters said. "Right away, soon's your outfit's in service."

Terry Byrne was watching as his commanding officer started for the city hall that afternoon. He limped, heavily and openly. When he returned at five o'clock, his limp was less noticeable.

"I got bad news for you, boys," he reported. "You're losing me. I was before the board. There's promotions along the line. A battalion chief was moved up today, up to eighth deputy marshal. I'm to be an acting bat chief."

He looked soberly about the circle of faces.

"The old bat commander takes Small John's place," he explained. "He's quit. I guess you know why. He was for leavin' my boys up there on top and startin' down himself. Now maybe that's good politics and I ain't sayin' it's not. But it's poor fire business. When they asked me, I told 'em. So he had a private talk with the chief. And he quit. Him and Jim Casey both."

He turned gravely to Terry Byrne.

"Time to eat, Byrne. Into the kitchen with you."

Terry's whistling, as he relighted the fire under the sliced potatoes, was interrupted by Captain O'Sullivan.

"You'll make a fireman yet, Terry me boy," he said. "But there's a thing to talk over with you. It don't matter what Small John said this morning. I've a notion it wasn't according to the little blue book. But that's past. Forget it. You done right by me today in that workout. And it's a pair o' questions I got to ask you now. What's the one thing don't belong in the fire business?"

Terry shook his head.

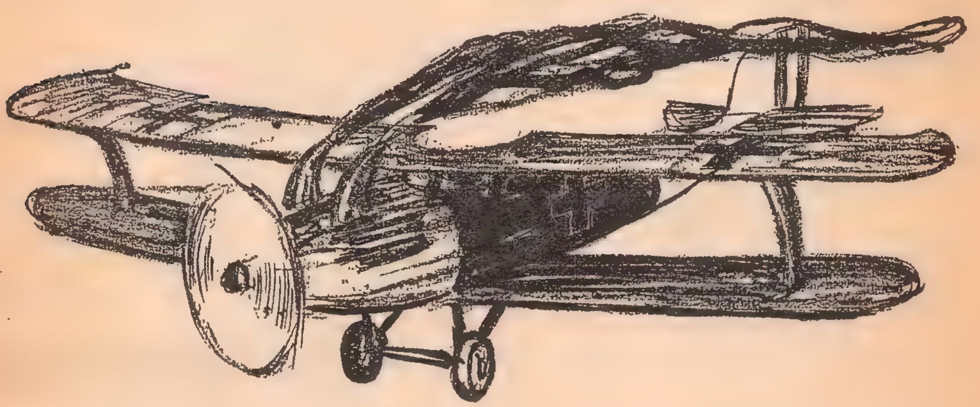
"A politician," Captain O'Sullivan said, "that's the answer. You ought to have guessed that, Terry. Now the other question is, where don't a politician belong?"

Terry grinned. He felt immensely better. He could answer this one.

"You're too slow," the captain chided. "Come on. Where don't a politician belong?"

"In the fire business," Terry admitted.

When two thirsty U. S. airmen ran into a German flying circus



Lead Lightning

By H. P. S. GREENE

A GLOOMY LOOKING little man sat in a damp, cheerless barrack in the valley of the Meuse, hugging as closely as possible to a tin stove about the size of a gallon oilcan. The long low building was without other occupant than him, and there was no sound to be heard but that of water dripping slowly from the trees on to the roof, and outside somewhere the deep baying of a Liberty motor. Subconsciously he noted that there was a skip in it that the mechanics must be trying to locate. Before him on the floor was a regulation foot-locker which he regarded with evident distaste.

"Seems a ghoulish thing to do," he muttered to himself, "prowling through a dead man's baggage, but I suppose somebody's got to do it, and I promised the adjutant I would. There might be incriminating evidence that it wouldn't do any good to send home to his folks. In fact, it might make 'em feel bad and do a whole lot of harm. Poor old Burke was a good feller and never did anybody any harm except when he got shot down in flames with the mess fund in his pocket, and I know he didn't do that on purpose."

The door opened and a red faced man appeared with a package like a shoebox under his arm.

"What now, Tommy?" he asked. "Why so sad? It's getting on toward three o'clock, and if it doesn't clear up before long we won't be able to raid today. 'Rain-Dance' Porter is going strong, and if he can hold 'em up and not weaken for another hour we'll be safe. Then at five we can go on down to Ma'mselle Lucie's and see what she's rustled up to eat and drink."

"Yeah," said Tommy morosely. "I remember the last time Porter was doin' his rain-dance so strong it cleared up, and B Squadron lost eight men. But come here. What's that you've got now, Dizzy?"

"What, this? Why, this is the new issue. Say, this is the best yet. Have a look."

He exhibited the label, "A Sucking-Bottle for Airmen," and opened the package. Inside was a thermos bottle in a khaki case to which were fastened various straps and gadgets, and from the neck protruded a rubber hose five or six feet long, with a nursing nipple on the end.

"Read the directions," said Dizzy. " 'Attach the bottle to strut or other part of the fuselage and fill with hot coffee, tea, cocoa or other refreshing and stimulating beverage!"

"Well, well," exclaimed Tommy. "If the U. S. Army hasn't had part of a thought at last. Wonder how these happened to get by all the Kiwis at Orly? They had better luck than the wrist watches they sent us. But then they wouldn't be much use around Paris unless somebody was going for a ride in the Bois.

"Now all we've got to do is find something to put in it. Rum's more refreshing and stimulating than any other beverage I know of at fifteen thousand feet, but since that dirty lowdown M.P. fainted in front of the only place in Tigny where they had any and got the old woman to give him a drink and then pinched her for doing it, she won't sell any to anybody."

"Maybe she would if we showed her our wings and told her we're brave aviators. Bet I could wangle some. But where did you get the foot locker?"

"Why, this is Burke's. Don't you remember the adjutant asked me to sort out his stuff and send it home to his folks? Come on and help me go through it."

He opened the cover. In the top of the tray was an apparently brand new whipcord uniform.

"Say, look at this," cried Tommy. "He must have been saving this to go home in. Look at the nifty embroidered shoulder bars. Made in Clermont—see the label? Well, I suppose this will have to go home for his folks to keep. What's underneath?" He lifted out the tray. "Humph, look at all the nice knitted socks—I don't suppose his old man will need these in St. Louis or Kansas City or wherever he lives half as much as we do. Better divvy these up."

"All right," said Dizzy. "That seems fair enough; they'd probably be glad for us to have them, and we'll need 'em bad enough before the winter's over. Say, here's some cards from Paris in the tray. Better chuck 'em in the stove, unless you want 'em."

"Who, me? Never mind. Well, here's a picture of his mother and dad. Nice looking old folks, aren't they? That goes back, and these new boots, I suppose. But this old issue underwear— Wha-a-at? Do my eyes deceive me? No, it *is*."

From the bottom of the trunk he produced a large leather covered flask. Then he shook it. It gurgled pleasantly.

"Well, well, well," murmured Tommy, after a reverential pause. "And what do you suppose it can be?"

"Never mind supposing," returned Dizzy. "Open it and don't keep me in suspense."

TOMMY slowly unscrewed the cap. Inside it was another. He unscrewed that also and placed the neck of the flask to his twitching nose.

"My God!" he cried, "It's Scotch, and good stuff, too. Say, he must have been saving this ever since he left England a year ago. A guy like that deserves to get killed. Think of all the times we've been almost dead with cold and damp, and here this was all the time. Well, what shall we do about divvying this up? This is a swell flask—must be worth five dollars. Suppose you take the flask and I'll drink the Scotch."

"Nothing stirring," yelped Dizzy. "But I'll tell you what we can do. We'll put it in the sucking-bottle for airmen. Then when we get real cold and stiff over the lines we can take a drag at it. How's that for a scheme? We can match for the flask."

"Fair enough," said Tommy, "only don't forget to give me my share. But say, what the hell's all the row outside? It can't be they're going to make us fly now, can it?"

One by one the deep voiced motors were starting up, until the barrack seemed to shake with their steady, continuous roar. Dizzy went to the door and looked out.

"Must be," he said. "Here comes the orderly to call us now. The ceiling's higher, but it doesn't look more than four or five thousand feet. Might as well get our flying clothes and go. And don't forget the sucking-bottle for airmen."

"Here, you take that," returned Tommy. "That's another of the observer's jobs. Come on, let's get going. Better be thankful we're going to fly A Squadron's Breguets instead of those roaring Coffins over there." He grabbed up his fur lined flying suit, boots and helmet. "Say, what's that you've got there?"

"My gun," answered Dizzy, holding out a .45.

"Put it away," ordered Tommy. "I suppose you want to try to shoot me through the head like Merian Cooper's observer did when he thought they were going to burn up, only it wasn't loaded, or fight the whole German Army on the ground if we get brought down. We've got enough to worry about without that."

Dizzy obeyed somewhat reluctantly, and they left the barrack.

When they reached A Squadron's hangars they found eight Breguets already warmed up and standing now with motors idling. Their own ship was a Corps d'Armée machine intended for long distance reconnaissance, and lacked the automatic ailerons on the lower wings which gave added lifting power to the bombers, and hence only carried light incendiary bombs. On the other hand it gained fifteen or twenty kilometers in speed.

"You fly protection above and behind the rest of the formation again, Tommy," said the flight leader, coming up.

"Above and behind is right," returned Tommy. "And a whole lot, too. After sideslipping under the bunch when they were laying eggs and almost getting bombed the other day, I'm going to keep away from them. It isn't safe flying too close."

"And here he is looking for something safe," laughed the flight leader.

"But look here, Tom," said Dizzy, "you don't want to get too far away from the rest or some Boches will come along and shoot us down. You know damned well one machine hasn't got a chance against a bunch of them. Look what happened when that formation got broken up in the clouds, and again when Sparrow fell on the stick. Only one or two got back out of the flight."

"To hell with the Boches!" retorted Tommy. "It's your business to shoot 'em if they come fooling around. Weren't you supposed to be the best shot who ever came out of Clermont? What I'm afraid of is getting run into. But if the Boches do come along, I've got lots more speed than the bombers and can always close up. Well, here we go. Got everything?"

FIVE minutes later they had taken off. It was no use circling for altitude, for they would reach the low hanging, lead colored clouds anyway before they crossed the lines. They would have to bomb below the clouds, for they stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. This meant an almost certain fight, for there would be no doubt about the Boche's pursuit planes being able to climb up and catch them.

Dizzy loaded and cocked his two Lewis guns and then strapped the precious thermos bottle to a strut. He looked carefully at his map and located the objective of the raid again. It was north by east beyond Verdun along the Meuse and nobody could miss it; and fortunately it wasn't far beyond the lines.

When they reached Verdun he looked anxiously around for the Spad protection they had been promised. No planes were in sight anywhere. He looked at his wrist watch and found that it was five minutes past the time of rendezvous. The Spads had probably already been there and gone. Of course they carried less than two hours' gas, but he thought they might have waited five minutes. It would be good to have *chasse* protection for a change.

They had almost reached the lines now, and he took the nipple of the sucking-bottle for airmen and dragged lustily at it. At first nothing happened, but then the Scotch came with a rush, choking and gagging him. With a grin he tapped Tommy on the head and handed him the tube. The little man seized it eagerly, put it to his mouth and then doubled over in a violent spell of coughing, while the plane wobbled about uncertainly. Dizzy chuckled to himself and retrieved the tube.

"Woof!"

Archie was beginning to speak, but the bursts were rather far away, even below the rest of the squadron. Dizzy peered anxiously around in every direction, but apparently they had the sky to themselves.

Then he took another suck at the nipple and offered it to Tommy. The little pilot glared at him through his goggles, and shook his head angrily. Again Dizzy chuckled. This would make a good story. Tommy Lang had refused a drink!

The white buildings of the objective loomed before them on the banks of the river, but elsewhere the ground was dull and gray under the dull gray sky. Visibility was getting poorer every minute as the sun which lighted the tops of the heavy clouds went down, and Dizzy wished they were well out of it.

Then they dropped their bombs and curved away on the dash for home. He could hardly see the town now. He noticed with a thrill of apprehension that the rest of the formation seemed to be getting farther away. He hit Tommy on the head and pointed to the other bombers, but the little pilot only shrugged angrily. Dizzy thought this idea of keeping away from the rest of the formation was being carried beyond a joke. What if some Boches came along? It would be easy for them to get under the Breguet's unprotected tail and shoot them down, for he had no tunnel guns to shoot below.

What? What were those dim shapes creeping up behind them? They came along slowly and without enthusiasm, not a bit like the Circus. One thing was certain, they weren't Spads. He couldn't make out any markings on their wings in the dim light, but they didn't look like Fokkers either. With that slim nose they must be Pfalz!

FROM the formation, now several hundred feet ahead of them, tracers began to cut through the murky air, but they died out before they reached even the hindmost Breguet. Dizzy fired a short burst from each gun in the direction of the pursuing planes. Then he turned around and hit Tommy a resounding whack on the helmet and pointed ahead and behind, howling a warning into the roar of the exhaust. But all he got from the little man was another angry shrug. When he turned back the Boches were closer. He didn't dare to turn again.

He remembered the directions said that if you fired too fast the enemy would think you were panic stricken and rush to the attack, so he confined his shots to short bursts. He'd work the right hand gun first and keep the other in reserve, he thought coolly. Strange how cool he was. He jerked off his clumsy gloves and threw them on the floor of his cockpit.

One German was directly behind his tail. Must get him out of there. He placed his shots closer and closer to the vertical stabilizer in spite of the danger of shooting off his own tail, until he saw the cloth shredding off under the stream of bullets. Lucky it was a Breguet and he had a stout metal pipe to shoot at instead of a wooden strut, as in a Coffin. If only Tommy would kick the rudder and give him a clear shot! But Tommy flew straight on.

Suddenly the Boche ducked out and sideslipped away. Dizzy had no time to watch and see whether he went on falling or not. The gun stopped suddenly, and he slapped the drum. It spun freely to prove its emptiness, and he threw it off and slapped on another.

The Boches seemed to be all around him, twelve or fifteen of them at least. All he could do was to shoot at the nearest one. There was one below him and to the left, hardly twenty feet away. The Pfalz swung up slowly, as though hanging by her nose, and he turned loose both his guns. A spurt of smoke came from her nose and she slipped off and disappeared.

He swung his guns on to another target. The right one stopped. A short burst, and so did the left. He applied "immediate action" to each in turn, but both the loading handles were jammed fast. Damn that defective ammunition! He jerked from his pocket the wooden auxiliary loading handle which fitted into the little ones on the guns for greater leverage and pulled again and again with all his might, but neither handle would move.

He suddenly realized that his hands were so stiff with cold he couldn't move his fingers. Foolish to think of clearing the jams. Two Boches had him right under their guns. Why didn't they shoot? He could almost feel the bullets tearing into him, and his knees buckled weakly.

And then it happened. From the sky came an avalanche of Spads. How pretty their square, strong little bodies were, and the red white and blue on their wings! One or two Germans dropped, and the rest and the Spads went into a furious, milling dogfight, while the bombers plodded grimly on their way.

Dizzy tried to fix one of his guns, but soon gave it up in disgust. The things would have to be dismantled, and he felt like throwing them away. Looking at the ground below, he saw that they had already crossed their own lines, and reaction set in. He sank down into the cockpit.

WHEN he began to take a renewed interest in the life he had so lately kissed goodby, he found that they were approaching their own airdrome. The other planes had already landed and were taxiing toward the hangars. As Tommy brought their machine to a halt, the other flyers crowded round it with a babel of shouting.

"My God, I never thought you'd get out of that alive!"

"What was the matter, couldn't you keep up with us?"

"Say that was the best fight we ever had without losing a man!"

"What fight?" asked Tommy weakly.

Another volley from the bystanders.

"Why, when Dizzy shot the Boche!"

"I was shooting at him, too."

"Go on, you couldn't have hit him at that distance with a seventy-five."

Finally Dizzy managed to raise his voice among the uproar.

"Say, why in hell didn't you wiggle the tail a little when that Boche was right behind it so I could get a shot at him?"

Tommy was nothing if not honest.

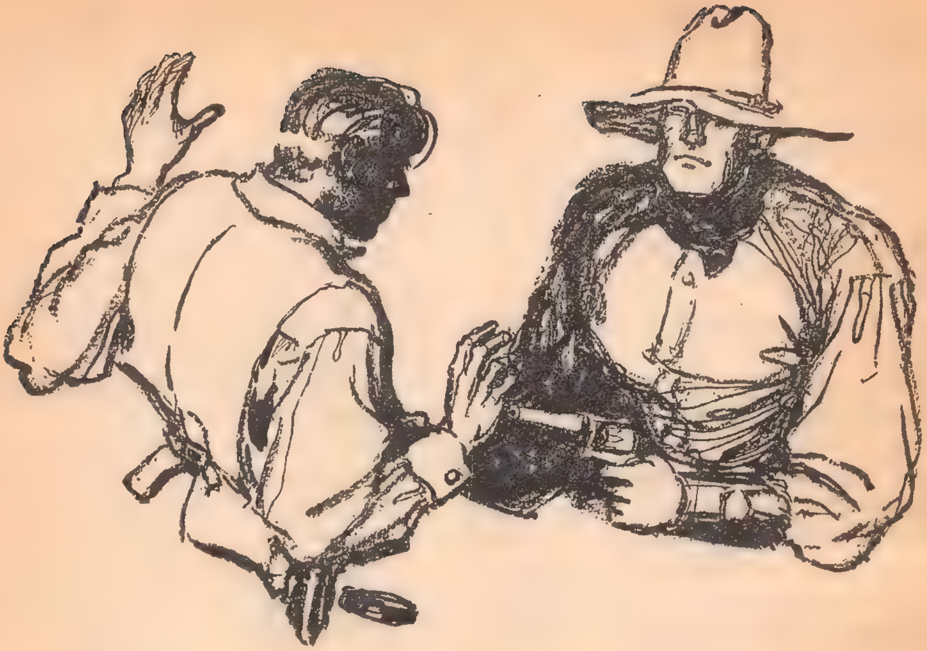
"But look here," he said, "I never saw any Boches or knew there was a fight," he admitted.

"But what did you think all the shooting was about?" Dizzy asked.

"Why, I thought you were straffing towns."

"And what did you think I was pounding you on the head for?"

"Why, I thought you wanted me to choke myself trying to take another drink out of that damned sucking-bottle for airmen!"



The indictment of a piece of string

Red for Rogues

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

"STICK 'em up!" barked the lean, green-eyed stranger, whose dished face was unmasked, as he presented both of his two guns to the stomach of Steve Brandon.

Steve noted that the guns were mismated, one being a stubby .38 and the other a lengthy .45. But against one gun or two the little merchant would have been the last man in the world to have resisted; he hoisted his hands shakily toward the ceiling of his store.

When it came to gunplay Steve was as timorous as a woman. He sold plenty of weapons in his hardware store, here in this little up-range town of Trinchera, but he never used or wore one himself. Not that he lacked character—in fact he was one of the most popular merchants in the county. He was simply by nature a man of peace who, in his twenty years of running a cowtown store, had been forced to witness more shootings than a few—episodes which, as he grew older, had increased his natural dread of violence.

So his hands went up. The dish faced man, seeing that his victim was in a funk, sheathed his left hand gun, the .38. Then he moved around behind the counter to rifle the cash register.

Steve Brandon wasn't worrying about any loss from that quarter. He knew the cash register only contained a measly thirteen dollars in silver. Let the fellow take that and be gone was Steve's fervent hope as he stood there with his arms upraised and witnessed the steal. As for the real stake in the store, a a package of one, five and ten dollar bills amounting to eight hundred and thirty-four dollars, Steve was positive that the bandit would never find that.

Because that very morning Steve had wrapped up his week's take-in to express on the next passenger for deposit in the Picketwire National Bank of Trinidad. The money was still in the store, but Steve was sure the outlaw would never find it. It was not in the cash register and Brandon had no safe. The thief was hardly likely to discover the secret drawer under the counter, a drawer which was not advertised by a knob and which opened only at the pressure of an inconspicuous button. By habit Steve kept nothing but silver in the cash register; currency, checks and more valuable tender were always secured in the knobless drawer.

A bell clinked, followed by an oath from the dish faced gunman. He had opened the register and observed with surly chagrin that it contained only a score of silver coins.

These he clawed out with his gunless left hand, the long .45 in his right never wavering from Brandon. Steve, watching him and with nothing further from his mind than resistance, noticed that the left hand which clawed the coins out and stuffed them in a pant's pocket was, like the gun it had held, oddly mismated with the gunman's right. It was whiter and appeared somewhat dwarfed or deformed, as though the fellow might have experienced some accident in his youth which had diseased that member. This no doubt explained, thought Steve, the heavy gun on the right side and the light one on the left.

"Where's yore safe?" snapped the outlaw.

He punctuated his demand with an oath and whipped the barrel of the .45 up to rap Brandon smartly under the chin.

"Haven't got any safe," Steve answered.

He was trembling like a leaf, wondering whether the man would crack down out of pure chagrin at getting so little loot.

The green eyes of the bandit searched the store and saw no safe. They returned to Brandon, flaming with hot resentment.

"Don't fool with me, runt. I know you get more coin than this. This ain't no take fer a crib this size—talk fast er git yore haid blowed off. Where d'you keep yore real money?"

Brandon had to decide, and quickly, whether to lie or to tell the truth. He did not weigh the decision against the value of the money at stake, but merely against its effect upon the bandit's temperament. Suppose he told of the secret drawer. The man would then open it and find a package addressed to the Picketwire National, together with a couple of loose five spots taken in since the package had been wrapped.

What then? Wouldn't he be just as likely to knock Brandon cold as he would if he hadn't found the larger cache at all? Whatever the sum of his thievings, the man must run out, mount his horse and ride fast. To insure his getaway he must render Steve incapable of sounding an alarm. Thus Steve reasoned that he was due for a knock on the head in any case. Very possibly the bigger the loot, the harder the knock.

"I keep my money, all of it, in the cash register," lied Steve.

The bandit sneered and prodded the merchant with his gun.

"Don't come that on me, runt. I give you one more chanct. Come clean or git yore haid blowed off."

Steve, ghastly white, regretted his lie. The menace in the green eyes convinced him more and more of his imminent peril. Maybe the man was not worrying about a gunshot being heard in other stores of the town. Maybe he knew that Trinchera was practically deserted this day, on account of the barbecue up at Wilson's Switch. Maybe he knew that the restaurant of Saul the Greek, next door, which usually housed a customer or two, was closed today because Saul himself was chef at the Wilson Switch barbecue.

In a turmoil of mind Steve opened his lips to tell the truth. But suddenly he stayed his confession because he saw that the dish faced man had half turned from him, was cocking an ear alertly toward distant sounds from without.

Clop-clop! Clop-clop! A horseman was galloping up Trinchera's main street.

The outlaw stiffened; his dwarfed left hand shot out and slammed shut the drawer of the cash register.

The *clop-clop* beat nearer, halting abruptly at the rack directly in front of Brandon's hardware store, the same rack at which the bandit's own mount was hitched. It was obvious that some one was about to intrude upon the holdup; little Steve sighed so loudly with relief that the dish faced man slapped him in the mouth.

"Listen, runt. One peep, one look—one sign from you that gives this show away and I shoots, twict. First shot'll be at you, get me? You ack like I'm jest a customer. I'll buy somethin' to make it look good, see? So much as bat yore eye or make any crack about me an' I'll plug you daid, whether I git the other bird er not."

Heavy boot steps sounded without, mounting the porch of the store.

The holdup man sheathed his .45 gun.

"You git the lay, runt," he whispered to Brandon. "I'm a customer, see? Bat yore eyes at this feller and the floor'll be a inch deep in blood."

"I won't say nothin'," promised Steve convincingly.

And he meant it. He was perfectly willing, even eager, to let the thief get clean away if only the affair were done.

THE dish faced man leaped over the counter into the main lobby of the store. As he did so his boot struck a cone of red wrapping twine and knocked it rolling down the counter. He paused a second to right this cone of twine, then swiftly crossed the store and sat down on a nail keg with his back against the far counter. He stretched his long legs out and rested his elbows on the counter back of him in the pose of an indolent customer in no great hurry about his purchase. The street door opened and the man who had been heard to gallop up entered the store.

"Howdy, Steve," the latter called genially; "where's everybody gone today?"

Again Steve's breath exhaled with eloquent relief; from over on the nail keg the outlaw scowled at him warningly and Steve sucked his breath in again. He resolved to say nothing or do nothing which would start a shooting.

For he was safe now. And what luck! Of all possible intruders here was the one he would have wished for most.

"Gone to the barbecue, Ed," he called to the newcomer.

He wondered if Ed Kane, his best friend and the crack deputy sheriff of Las Animas County, would detect any strained quality in his voice or note a pallor in his face. Kane, a two hundred pound chunk of manhood with pink cheeks and friendly blue eyes, walked up to Steve and shook hands.

"Gone to the barbecue, huh?" he remarked. "Well, well! Wonder you hadn't locked up and gone yourself, Steve. How's business? Pretty good?"

The big deputy perched himself on a counter, the cash drawer counter, and this position placed him face to face with the dish faced stranger who was seated opposite on a keg. There was nothing in the latter's stance to indicate that he was other than a customer or a loafer.

"Howdy?" greeted Kane affably as he began rolling a cigaret.

He had never seen the other man before, but it was his habit to render such greeting to almost any one he met.

"Howdy," returned the outlaw in a colorless voice, his green eyes darting back and forth from Brandon to the deputy.

The fact of deputyship was advertised by a brass star on Kane's vest, an insignia which was supported by a gun at his hip of the same size and make as the one in the stranger's right holster.

"Roll one?" invited Kane.

The man on the keg shook his head and Kane restored the makings to his vest.

Steve Brandon, even with Kane in the store, was far from comfortable. He was afraid he might inadvertently tip the situation to Kane; and he didn't want any blood on his floor, much less an inch of it, whether the blood was his own or Kane's or even the bandit's. What he wanted was for the crook to walk out with his measly thirteen dollars of loot, mount his horse and ride away. But of course he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't dare. He would be dead sure that the minute his back was turned the merchant would tip the deputy and he, the outlaw, would be covered from the rear. So of course he wouldn't leave—until after Kane had left. He would of course outstay the latest comer to insure his own safety.

"Wonder if it ain't gettin' along toward feedin' time," Kane observed, pulling a heavy gold watch from his vest to note the hour. "Sure is, and then some," he added. "Guess I'll go over and get Saul to fry me a T-bone."

The deputy stretched his long arms and then made a move to descend from the counter.

"Saul's place is locked up today," Steve informed quickly. "He's over at the barbecue."

Steve's tone was overly anxious; he didn't want his friend to leave the store.

Kane settled on the counter again and began to construct his second smoke. Steve looked furtively at the outlaw. He saw a murderous glare in the green eyes; he saw the stunted left fist double, saw the man's right hand touch the butt of his gun. The gestures were eloquent; they warned Steve that if he said anything more to discourage Kane's exit something would happen, and quick.

Steve could see that the crook would have every advantage in a battle of guns. He, the crook, was primed and alert for such action and Kane was not. Steve was almost afraid to look at Kane, lest the look be interpreted as a signal and draw the gunman's bullets.

Yet he did look once or twice toward his friend, and he saw that an expression of increasing puzzlement was forming on the deputy's face. It appeared that Kane, who was nobody's fool, sensed some degree of the strange awkwardness which overhung the triangle. Steve saw that he was sizing up the dish faced stranger from between half closed eyelids; suddenly he glanced toward Brandon himself, and the look was plainly a question.

Brandon turned away, avoiding Kane. He kept telling himself that there would be no blood spilt, if he could help it, over a measly thirteen dollars. Kane was his best friend, and how could one tell how an encounter between Kane and the two-gun outlaw might come out? He who was the most alertly expectant of conflict would probably draw first blood. Far better, thought Steve, to let the fellow get clean away—with thirteen dollars.

"You didn't answer my question, Steve," Kane was saying, and Steve jumped. He was thinking of the question in Kane's eyes.

"I asked," went on the big deputy, "how was business? Pretty good?"

Relieved, Steve nodded.

"Yes, Ed; pretty good."

"Fine," returned Kane, reaching in his pocket. "In that case you can cash a check for me, Steve. I'm some short."

He drew out a book of blank checks on the Picketwire National of Trinidad.

At the mention of money Steve's uneasiness increased. He glanced again toward the bandit, saw the green eyes fixed on him warningly, saw the man's tense posture and the nervous thumb which stroked the gun butt at his right hip.

Kane was fishing a fountain pen from another pocket.

"Five dollars'll do, Steve," he said, and poised his pen to write a check.

And Steve, who had just admitted to Kane that business was pretty good, must now admit that he couldn't cash a five dollar check.

"Why, er—no, Ed," he floundered. "I haven't got any—er, I guess I can't cash no check right now. Kinda short myself."

Kane looked up in surprise. With his pen still poised over the check he said:

"We—ll, all right, Steve; if you're short. Say, three dollars'll do." Again he started to write on the check.

Steve, knowing the cash register was empty, said hastily: "Why, er, Ed, come to think of it, I ain't got a cent in the house. The boys all come in and cashed checks in order to go to that barbecue, and they cleaned me out."

Kane's expression seemed to indicate increasing puzzlement. Never before in his ramblings about the county had Brandon failed to provide him with ready cash. Brandon mentally admitted the lameness of his excuse. The Wilson Switch barbecue was free, and it hardly looked reasonable that there should have been such a wholesale cashing of checks as to have cleaned out Steve's store of its last cent.

It was the green eyed outlaw himself who solved the issue. Perhaps it was his idea that the quicker Kane cashed his check and got out, the quicker he would have the field to himself. Or perhaps he merely retained his original idea, mentioned to Brandon before Kane's entrance, of buying some article to give plausibility to his rôle as a customer.

Ever since he had been sitting on the keg, the dish faced man had been trying to decide on a purchase which would be both cheap and convincing. The shelves and counters were stocked with all manner of hardware, saddlery and leather goods; the latter included chaperejos, wristlets, belts, riding gauntlets—a complete line of leatherware employed on the range.

On one counter a sales sign announced: "Doeskin Rodeo Gloves reduced $5 to $3." It caught the outlaw's eye.

He addressed Steve.

"Say, mister; you ain't wrapped up them gloves I ast you for jest before this feller come in. Believe you said they'd shake me down fer three bucks. Here y'are. And say, that'll give you a chanct to cash this gent's check, too." With that the dish faced man produced three of the thirteen dollars he had recently stolen and handed them out to Brandon.

Steve was considerably befuddled, as this of course was the first mention of gloves. But he saw the fires of warning burning in the green eyes and heard the man add sharply—

"Wrap them gloves up, mister."

Steve understood at last and walked around behind the counter—the counter on which Kane was perched. He decided that the wisest course was to play the game; so he asked, with something of his brisk shop manner:

"Oh, yes; ridin' gauntlets. And what size was it you said you wore?"

He began looking at size numbers on various flat boxes which contained rodeo gloves. The man on the keg hesitated about naming the size. He didn't know his size, for as a habit he did not wear gloves at all. Two-gun men never do. In a moment he said—

"Nines'll be about right, I guess."

He shifted his gaze from Steve to the big pink cheeked deputy. The latter, he saw, was looking fixedly at his hands, first at the great hamlike right and then at the deformed and dwarfed left. Hands which no stock pair of gloves on any shelf in the world would have fitted. The eyes of the bandit and the eyes of the sheriff met and clashed.

Steve, from behind the counter, saw the clash and turned paler than ever. Every new second he expected to see black metal leap from brown leather and begin choking the room with smoke. It seemed impossible that deception should endure a minute longer between those two men, the clean cut, blue eyed sheriff and the dish faced thief. Even now their eyes were clashing. They were sitting quite still; Steve could hear the ticking of the big gold watch in Kane's vest pocket.

But to Steve's surprise, Kane, turning his head, said:

"Steve, I gotta go over to Sam Hollenbeck's law office and see him about that sheep stealing case on Johnson Mesa. Cash this check for me, will yuh? You got three dollars now."

"All right," answered Steve, laying the box of number nine gauntlets down and approaching Steve to receive the check.

He was so relieved at the passing of the recent crisis that for a few seconds he forgot that another was coming. If Kane left, he, Steve, would be alone again with the outlaw.

By now the deputy had written his check. He tore it off, handed it to Steve, took in exchange the three silver dollars and strode out of the store. The little merchant felt a sinking at the pit of his stomach. He opened his lips to call after Kane, but knew despairingly that such an outcry would merely seal his own doom and that of Kane.

He dared not provoke the guns of the man over there on the keg. One peep—even so much as the bat of an eye—the man had warned! So Steve, between the devil and the deep blue sea, had to stand there and choke back his cries, had to watch his friend and ally leave the store.

Why had Kane been so abrupt in his leaving, wondered Steve. It wasn't like him. He wasn't afraid, Steve knew. Maybe after all he had suspected nothing—perhaps Brandon had merely imagined his air of puzzlement.

In his hands Steve held the three dollar check. He looked over it at the dish faced man who, having arisen now from the keg, was sneering at him. Stupidly Steve looked into the green eyes and then down again at his miserable check.

Suddenly his muscles became rigid, though his heart began beating faster than ever. He read the check. There was not a figure on it. It was not a check. It was merely a message written across the face of a Picketwire National blank form:

> Steve:
>
> What you so white under the gills for? I'll be watching this bird when he comes out. If you want him pinched, tie his package with *red* string. If he's on the level, use *white*.
>
> —Kane.

The message was as clear as crystal. Steve's heart gave a bound. Why, what a cinch that would be! Red string or white. Here was a signal which the outlaw could not possibly detect, a signal direct to a potent and forewarned arm of the law.

All he need do would be to wrap the package containing the pair of number nine gloves with red twine and let the outlaw walk out with it, advertizing his perfidy to Kane. On the counter in front of Steve were two cones of wrapping twine, one of common white, which he used generally for lighter bundles, and one of red, a slightly stouter quality used on heavier or more valuable sales. Yes, thought Steve, this trick of Kane's was air tight; and the crook would never dream that there was any vital import to the color of the string on his package.

Steve jumped nervously, looking up from the fake check, because he heard the outlaw walking across the floor. He was a tremble lest the man should snatch the paper from him and read Kane's message. But no, the fellow was moving stealthily toward the front, to watch from the door and verify Kane's retreat, to see if indeed the deputy were turning into Hollenbeck's law office, just beyond Saul's restaurant.

Steve was in a sweat to hide the fake check. To do so, he pressed with his thumb a button under the counter—and his secret money drawer popped open. It was his cache for all checks and currency—a natural depository for this check in hand. He threw it in and jammed the drawer shut.

It closed with a click, as the catch caught, and the bandit whirled. Back he came, gun out.

Steve wondered if he had heard that click. To cover his confusion he reached for the box of number nine rodeo gauntlets and engaged himself in wrapping it in brown paper. His hands shook and he felt those green eyes boring holes in him as he wrapped. For a merchant of twenty years practise he bungled the wrapping but finally it was done, and then Steve groped unsteadily for a string.

Ah, the string! Which string? Should he use the white and let the thief ride clear of the town? Or the red and frame him into a gunfight with Kane?

For Steve was dead sure that if his friend essayed an arrest there would be shooting. Fast, bloody shooting. There was no question but what the green eyed outlaw would resist, and it would be he or Kane. Steve shuddered. He thought a good deal of Kane. Of course it was Kane's duty and his own to apprehend this thief—but—what was the thievery of thirteen dollars compared with human life? Steve looked fearfully up into the hard green eyes across the counter and then—he reached for the white string.

The white string! Yes; no use to weigh silver against blood; he reached for the white string.

He broke off a length and wrapped the package. He extended the package tremblingly toward the outlaw. The latter swore, knocked it from his hand, jumped over the counter and pressed cold steel to Brandon's breast.

"Where's that check?" he snapped.

"I—I— Why, you couldn't pass it; it's no good to you," murmured Steve.

"Where is it?"

"I put it away," Brandon bleated.

"Where?"

"I—I—" Words failed Steve. He knew he was trapped.

"I heard a latch click," snapped the outlaw. "You put that check in some money drawer. Open it, before I bean you."

The game was up. Steve pressed a button and again the money drawer popped open.

The green eyes explored it, saw a couple of loose bills, a check or two, an account book and a long flat package. The package was addressed to the Picketwire National Bank, Trinidad, Colorado, and sealed with wax. Its presence in a money drawer and its address was sufficient evidence to bring an exultant light into the hitherto hard green eyes. The man snatched it, snatched also the two loose bills, ignoring the checks and the account book.

He then knocked Steve Brandon senseless with the barrel of his gun and left the store.

Out in the street he saw the big, pink cheeked deputy emerge from Hollenbeck's law office two doors away. The bandit reached for the bridle rein of his horse. Then he noticed that the deputy was walking straight toward him, looking intently at the package which he carried under his left arm. Guiltily conscious of the contents of that package, the dish faced man resented such searching gaze. He dropped the rein and crouched, ready for trouble.

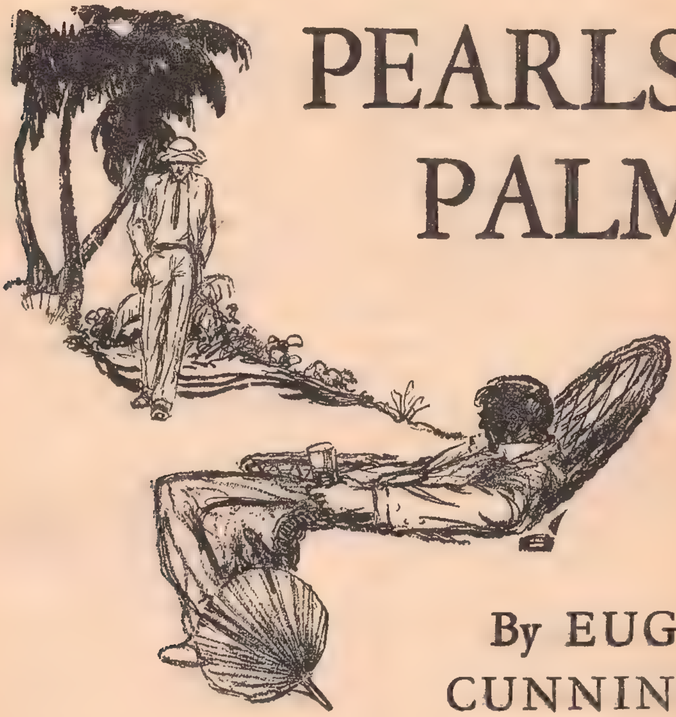
It came. Ed Kane looked carefully at the color of the string on the package, and drew. He was no quicker than the green eyed crook, who was already crouched with hand on holster. The two shots were as one, and Kane stumbled to his face with a bullet in the flesh of his leg. The bandit leaped to his horse and dug deep with his spurs; but Kane, coming groggily to his knees, fired again. The slug missed, but it frightened the horse and it reared on its hind legs. The crook shot twice more at Kane. The horse was unguided, for one of the rider's hands was wielding a .45 and the other—the dwarfed left—was clutching the long flat package. From the back of this unguided and now plunging horse the shots went wild. Kane's third was better, smashing the outlaw's collar bone. The horse reared higher and the fellow came sliding, gun, package and all, down over its tail. A hoof struck him and he lay still in the dust.

The deputy staggered forward and picked up the man's loot. He saw Steve Brandon come to the door of his store, holding his head with both hands.

"It worked fine, Steve," called Kane. "I see you tied his package with red string."

And Kane wasn't color blind, either. Red string was what Steve Brandon always used to tie the heavy, valuable packages of bills which he sent to the Picketwire National Bank.

A story of the West Coast that seems to prove that fair exchange is no robbery



PEARLS *of* PALMAS

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

THE PEARL fishery of Las Palmas was noted up and down the West Coast. Not for great size or large output, for the beds were tiny, mere remnants of large beds intermittently fished from the times of the *conquistadores,* but because through some freak of location the fine pearls brought up at Las Palmas were very fine indeed, of colors and, more important still, of shades that came near to making each a gem in itself a thing possessed of definite individuality.

Hence, a pink pearl of Las Palmas might bring almost any price, but always a price greater than that commanded by a mere pink pearl. The drawback to the fishery was the infrequency with which pearls of respectable size were found. Another drawback—in view of those who, from time to time, dropped off a mail boat at the sleepy little beach town with thought of entering the pearl fishing industry—was the concession owned in perpetuity by the American, Old Man Williams, a concession that covered every oyster bed in those waters like a blanket.

Old Man Williams was as famous on the west coast as Las Palmas pearls. And justly so, not only for his ownership of the oyster beds, but because of the oddities of his character. Those who knew him superficially were likely to characterize him as many different varieties of freak. Actually, he was merely a man with the shrewd, educated brain proper to his fifty years, but actuated by the romantic, adventurous heart of *Tom Sawyer*. The trouble was that he sometimes got credit for possession of one of these qualities and sometimes for the other, but rarely for both in combination.

From year's end to year's end the credit side of the Williams' ledger was likely to show as proportionately favorable balance as that of most business men. But to arrive at that balance he employed methods, embraced chances, that would have made the average merchant white haired in a twelvemonth.

To the incorrigibly boyish Williams life would not have been worth living had he been impelled to forever play safe in his undertakings. He liked to gamble; to put an element of chance, of romance, into his life.

He sat upon the seaward veranda of his rambling house in the early morning coolness of a February day. The jar of a great Turkish water pipe was upon the broad veranda rail and the end of the long tube was between his teeth. He puffed away enthusiastically. The *huquah* had arrived by the last mail steamer from a friend in the States and was receiving all the attention he accorded any new toy. The fragments of an ancient typewriter—purchased the day before from a wandering pill doctor—were strewn across the little, low table between his knees and he regarded the intricacies of its inward parts with boyishly bright blue eyes.

"Hey, Antonio!" he yelled at the clerk inside his "office," without turning his his head. "I begin to see the run of it! I'll bet you two balboas that I'll have it all mobilized and talking Spanish inside one hour and twenty-nine minutes."

"A steamer comes," Antonio informed him from the door, ignoring this brilliant opportunity to lose two balboas. "It is *un vapor pocito* and I—no, I do not see heem before, ever."

Williams glanced interestedly to the right, down the white, palm fringed beach to where an outjutting of the coast line formed Las Palmas' half sheltered port. A small, rusty sided, trampish looking steamer lay motionless upon the glassy water. As Williams turned his head there came the rumbling roar of chain pouring through the hawse pipe. He took the glasses from Antonio's hand and studied the craft.

Wanderer, he read on the bow.

"Hmm. She's a stranger, all right, Antonio. Well, we'll doubtless have company."

He returned to the assembling of the typewriter. His confident assurance of a call from the steamer people was born of his position as the only white man in Las Palmas rather than from his post as consul for a ninth rate republic farther south. The shield of that country above his door was hardly likely to be a magnet.

LESS than a half hour later his prophecy was fulfilled by appearance at his street gate of a tall, bronzed young man in stiffly starched white ducks, white buck oxfords and a great sun helmet. Williams nodded cordially to his visitor and indicated a deck chair on his right. The newcomer lifted off his helmet, revealing sleek black hair that, pushed straight back from a high, narrow forehead, seemed to enclose his skull like an inky shell. He had a thin, arched nose and very bright, very wise, very bold black eyes set somewhat close upon its bridge. His chin was long and pointed. His wide, always smiling mouth seemed almost lipless.

"Tower's my name, Mr. Williams," he remarked pleasantly. "I'm afraid you'll have to call me a tourist. I'm sort of taking in Central and South American ports for curiosity. My doctor in San Francisco prescribed this stunt and so for the past year I've been poking about pretty generally. Sometimes I travel *de luxe* and again—as now—I buy or bribe passage aboard 'most any sort of craft. So long as it's headed generally in the direction that takes my fancy, it suits me. I picked up the *Wanderer* at Panama, for instance."

"Well, that's a pleasant way to do it," nodded Williams absently, with eyes upon the typewriter. "Let's see. This hook here manifestly engages this slot. Righto! Now, what's next? Hmm!"

Tower regarded him with a shade of easy amusement in his smile.

"Everybody told me that I must see Las Palmas," he went on easily.

"Eh? And why?" inquired Williams, turning a bright blue eye upon Tower.

"Why, they said it was a typical Central American beach town and, too, they called it quite interesting historically.

"Well, yes, it's that," agreed Williams. "See that low island out there in the Bay? That hazy blue elephant's back? That's Buccaneer Island. It was a pirate stronghold long ago. The natives here have traditions about buried treasure. I guess I've dug out there ten times."

"Without finding anything, of course?" Tower nodded amusedly.

"Indeed not! The last time I dug I found a copper cooking pot and the half of a rusty cutlas. I've got them in the house now."

"But the gold—the treasure—"

"Why, I don't know about that. Perhaps there isn't any. But that cooking pot and cutlas proved to me beyond doubt that there really were buccaneers encamped on the island, at one time. That was what I was after."

"It's along that island that the pearl fishery lies, isn't it?" asked Tower casually, his eyes roving seaward.

"Oh, no! They're north of here nine miles or so. Are you interested in pearls, Mr. Tower?"

"Why—" Tower seemed somewhat taken aback by the question—"why, I suppose I am. Never have had a great deal to do with them, but they always impressed me as being—next to emeralds and opals, perhaps—the most beautiful of gems. Too, there's the fascination born of the money each of 'em represents."

"I've got a bunch here," said Williams, busily juggling typewriter parts. "Fine 'n's too. I suppose they told you, down south, that I control these beds and always keep a few of the finest ones about?"

"Why, I suppose they did," shrugged Tower. "Tell me you control the beds, that is. Don't recall them saying anything about what you did with the pearls."

Williams seemed not to hear.

"Here you are, Antonio," he called to the clerk. "All ready for work in—" he produced a fat gold watch—"one hour, sixteen minutes and *thirty-seven seconds!* So you lose the two balboas."

"*Por la virgen, no!*" denied Antonio piously. "I am not take heem, those bet."

"I'll show you some pearls now," grunted Williams as Antonio carried off the typewriter.

He got up, a squat, smooth faced man with big hands that were yet supple enough to tinker with the works of a watch. His bare feet, small as a woman's almost, were thrust into a pair of native sandals. He went flap-flapping off inside the office. Tower, leaning back comfortably, watched him unlock a huge, shiny black safe and take from one of the myriad compartments within a chamois bag. In the visitor's lean bronzed throat a pulse began to hammer furiously.

Williams came flapping back and resumed his seat. He loosened the thongs of the chamois bag and cascaded out upon the table a dozen or so of tissue wrapped objects. One by one he set free from their papers shimmering, iridescent globules of varying sizes and even more variegated shading. Tower sucked in his breath audibly, then instinctively his hand came up to touch pearls of creamy white, of ebon black, of rose and pink and gray. Williams grinned faintly.

"If you were a pearl expert you would know that our Las Palmas pearls are unique. We get shades that seem to be found nowhere else. What do you think of that pink 'n', for instance?"

"Why, it does seem a peculiar shade," said Tower. His thin face was set and his hand shook a little as he picked up the "pink 'n'" designated. "But these must be worth something; really, a fortune!" he cried. "And you just keep them around the place this way!"

"Oh, ideas of fortunes sometimes differ," said Williams. "Suppose they were worth a half million, a million, even? What could the money buy me that I haven't now?"

The door at the veranda end—which led, apparently, into one of the living rooms—opened now. A woman stood framed within it; a tall, slender woman with the ivory-clear features, the great, dark eyes of the Spanish gentlewoman. Her dark hair was graying slightly and Tower guessed that this was Mrs. Williams.

"Roberto!" she called, and Williams, with a grunt of apology to Tower, went to her.

She talked rapidly for a moment, one tiny pump toe tapping the doorsill nervously. Williams' answers to her were reassuring of tone. He patted her shoulder, then turned and came back to Tower, who was toying with the pearls.

"Mothers are alike the world over," said Williams, sitting down. "Bill, our oldest boy, went out to the Island yesterday and hasn't gotten back yet. The *señora* is worried. Well, what do you think of them?"

"Marvelous! Do you find the market for pearls affected by the—I am told really marvelous—imitations that are made now?"

"No, in spite of the fact that, in France, for instance, artificial pearls are made so cleverly as to be practically indistinguishable from the genuine. *You* couldn't tell the real from the artificial. *I* couldn't. Still, the women want real pearls, even though they wear the imitations most of the time for safety's sake. So I guess we'll go on selling real pearls for quite a while to come."

He replaced the pearls in their tissue wrappings and dropped them back into the chamois bag. Tower asked many questions after that regarding the country behind Las Palmas. A half hour or so later he rose.

"I've surely enjoyed my visit, Mr. Williams," he smiled. "Now, I guess I'll go back aboard."

"Sailing soon?" inquired Williams courteously.

"Possibly this afternoon. Possibly not till tomorrow. Just depends."

"Well, then, if I don't see you again—*buen viaje!*"

"Why, thanks!" smiled Tower.

As the tall, lean figure went striding back down the beach path toward the landing Williams rose and yawned. His wife appeared again in the doorway. She glanced at Tower's diminishing figure, then inquiringly at her husband.

"Well?" she asked. "Was I right? *Did* I see his hands busy with the pearls when your back was turned?"

"You were, *carissima*. You did. Within ten minutes of his arrival on the steamer it will be underway and standing out of here. Antonio!"

"*Si, señor?*"

"Bring to me the revolver purchased from that tramping *Americano* who visited us last week."

Antonio appeared, bearing gingerly a long barreled, single action Colt, and laid it upon the table.

"Well?" asked Williams' wife again. "He took pearls from the table?"

"A half dozen, I should say. But the imitations he left I deem quite as good as those left by the last three gentlemen of his kind to visit us—as good as those he took away."

He sat down at the table with the revolver before him.

"This revolver, *carissima*, with but one small screw's replacement, will be as good as new. And that foolish tramp thought it broken beyond repair, so he sold it to me for three balboas! I can fix it easily. Be so good as to hand me the tiny screwdriver there at your hand."

Buying A Clown

by JOHN L. CONSIDINE

ALTHOUGH California was admitted as a free State there are at least two instances of slavery there. One was the case of a negro named Archy, brought into the State by his master, a Mississippian named Stovall. It came before the Supreme Court and a decision was handed down returning Archy to his master, but declaring the circumstances exceptional. As a local wag put it, the decision gave "the law to the North and the nigger to the South." Eventually, however, Archy won his freedom.

The other case never reached the courts. Its only record that I know of appeared in the *Reese River Reveille*, of Austin, Nevada, in the pioneer days of that camp. Apparently it was given to that journal by a local resident, known as Old Dad, who had once lived in Nevada County, California.

In the camp in which he resided at that time money was plentiful, gambling was as common as praying at a camp meeting and whisky was as free as water. But the boys pined for a little excitement, and Dad concluded to give it to them and incidentally make a little cleanup for himself. His plan was to build an amphitheater on the outskirts of town, send a hunter into the mountains to trap a bear (bears were numerous in the Sierra), procure a bull and have a regular old fashioned bull and bear fight on the Mexican plan at two dollars a throw.

The amphitheater was built, the animals procured and a day set for the argument. The announcement threw three counties into paroxysms of excitement.

But in order to have the show pulled off in strict accordance with the Mexican custom it was necessary to have a black clown. The local American colored men knew nothing of bull fight clowning, and Dad found it impossible to persuade any of them to learn. He was in despair until he learned of a Central American negro who knew the business. But this Sambo was a notoriously slippery customer in money matters, and the question was how to sew him up for the performance without letting him have money with which he might decamp.

It was decided to buy him and own him out and out. As he had no master, it became necessary to buy him from himself. A bargain was struck and Sambo taken before a lawyer by whom a bill of sale was drawn transferring him to Dad for the sum of five hundred dollars. As a free agent, he might have spent his advance money before levanting, thus being guilty of nothing more than a breach of trust, but as a slave, betaking himself to other parts, he could not avoid incurring a liability for embezzlement.

On the day of the fight a procession was formed, headed by Sambo—tricked out in a spangled shirt and brand new red flannel drawers—a brass band and a coterie of Mexican bull experts; and followed by a concourse of three thousand miners, which marched to the arena.

But the show ended abruptly. Maddened by Sambo's red flannel drawers, the bull instantly lunged at him and pitched him high in the air. To save Sambo the Mexicans were obliged to kill the bull, ending the show right there. To add to Dad's troubles, the gatekeeper took advantage of the excitement to decamp with the admission money, six thousand dollars all told.

And, since the negro was now useless for clowning purposes, Dad made him a present of himself back to himself. A moral wave submerged the community, and there wasn't another bull and bear fight in Nevada County for all of three weeks.

Conclusion

The Sun Chasers

A novel of frontier days in the Nebraska Territory

By HUGH PENDEXTER

DURING the Civil War the Nebraska frontier was wild and lawless. No farm or village was safe from that last terrible uprising of the Sioux; not even Fort Kearny was untouched. Bad men followed in the wake of the Indians, pillaging farms, wagon freight trains and towns. Those pioneers who had settled in Nebraska ten years before had hitherto suffered little more than paper money panics, land claim frauds and severe seasons. The Strong family had developed a fine farm on the North Fork.

It was to the Strong farm that Nancy Freedom had taken George Hancey when he had rescued her from the Toms gang. The Strongs had not seen Hancey since he left Plattsmouth years before on the trail of Blackie, the murderer of his father. He declared that he would never settle down until he got Blackie. After all, he had become a gambler and bad

man only for the purpose of following another bad man.

All plans were cut short by an Indian raid. While protecting the fleeing wagons and herds of the Strongs, Hancey was captured by White Killer. When he refused to build a teepee for the chief another prisoner was brought in. It was Blackie. While Blackie was erecting a teepee for White Killer the Indians were discovering that everything in barrels was not whisky. Hancey noted that the barreled loot was kerosene. He tossed a lighted fagot on the oil and, in the midst of the sudden conflagration, he escaped.

Down the creek which led from the camp he found a deserted shack. There he spent the night. In the morning when he was examining the dugout beneath the floor his eyes suddenly fell upon a figure entering the doorway—a red face, a chest painted in red, green and black circles and the profile striped in many colors.

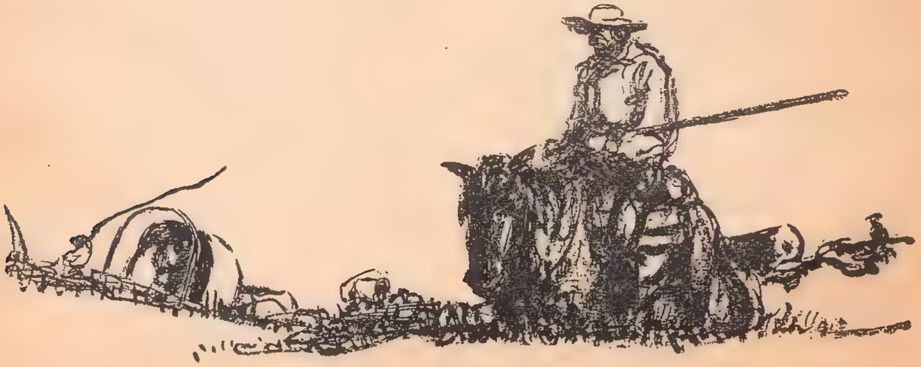
CHAPTER XI

OUT OF THE NET

HANCEY was astounded by this unexpected appearance of the painted man. He had not attempted to solve the mystery of the sudden confusion in the Sioux camp. It had been sufficient for him to know that it had been the means of his escaping the skinning knives. He was amazed to the point of stupefaction by realizing that the White Killer by accident, or design, had overtaken him. For a few seconds his mind remained benumbed, then he was blindly groping for some answer to the riddle.

If the Killer had been on his track why had he slept outside the cabin door? There was no sense in such a procedure. If the man had been too drunk to enter the cabin, how had he managed to follow the blind trail and where were his savages? Or had he slain a warrior while drunk and been compelled to ride for his life and made the ash growth without any purpose except that of finding cover? Something extraordinary had caused the wild commotion and had furnished the minute of laxity which had permitted a prisoner to escape.

A pole in the flooring creaked, and instantly Hancey was wondering why the Killer was wearing boots. This change in footgear was tremendously perplexing to the fugitive squatting in the hole below the floor. It weighed against the theory of precipitate flight. During the ten seconds in which these odds and ends of bewilderment were racing through Hancey's brain, the intruder had satisfied himself that the cabin was empty. With the creaking poles betraying his change of position he stepped to the small aperture which served as a peephole rather than a window and which afforded an abbreviated survey of the approach from the south.



For nearly a minute there was no sound; then the telltale steps announced that the man was making for the end of the room beyond the hole. Hancey darted his two hands upward and violently ripped the booted feet clear of the floor and brought the visitor down on his side with a crash. Before the prostrate figure could offer to rise, Hancey was on his feet and had torn one of the three belted revolvers loose and was digging the muzzle into the painted ribs. Then he secured the other two guns. With a grunt, as if the unexpected fall had knocked the wind from his lungs, the man rolled on his back and stared blankly at the dishevelled figure standing waist deep in the hole.

Hancey softly exulted:

"No matter what happens I've got you, damn you! And you've fetched me my own guns! They'll never get me alive again! How many are with you? Where are they? How long have you been asleep outside this hut?"

The man gaped like an expiring fish and breathed spasmodically for a bit. Then he hoarsely whispered:

"Paint's fooled you! You're thinking I'm White Killer."

Hancey glared at the painted face, striped with bars of different colors. He swept his gaze over the brawny chest, thickly decorated with interlocking circles of red and green and black. Instead of Indian thigh leggings the man was wearing trousers. And the eyes were not those of the white renegade.

"Good God! You're Blackie!"

"Sure, I'm Blackie. I done for White Killer in his little medicine lodge and smeared myself with his pattern of paint, and took his guns and walked through the camp and reached the pony herd."

Hancey was recalling the convulsive movement of the Killer's body when he had advanced halfway through the opening. There was much to admire in the breed's quick wit and action.

"Killed him! You'd planned that when you offered to help him!" muttered Hancey.

"No other chance on earth. I was riding straight north when hell seemed to be busting loose in the camp. I reckoned they was after me; then there was the light of a big fire. I turned to the east and the pony went lame when I got down near this growth. Quit him and come on here afoot and took a chance on a bit of sleep. Now what be you going to do with me? There was a promise of a fair fight."

Hancey crawled from the hole and stared down on the grotesque figure. In the back of his mind there persisted unwilling admiration for the dramatic, though simple expedient. He could not understand why he had not tried it when the Killer asked him to help erect the lodge. His eyes half closed as he began remembering his long man hunt.

He said:

"The cards are running for me once more. Luck sent you to me. I always vowed I'd shoot you down like a dog if I caught up with you."

"That was before we met in the big soddy. There you 'lowered you'd give me somewhere near an even break."

"And you dug out and rode for it when we caught fire."

"You wouldn't be here, prodding me with a gun, if I hadn't started a rumpus in the Sioux camp. You'd be tied over a wagon wheel with some Sioux men working over you."

"You're wasting your breath trying to argue me to be merciful," coldly assured Hancey.

"But I give you your chance. You oughter give me a shadow of a chance. Why, if you'd stood alone by that fire when I passed, I'd made myself known to you and tried to take you along with me."

Hancey laughed silently, then murmured:

"Like hell you would! Luck's turned against you after all these years. You're cleaned out and must cash in your last chip—your miserable life."

Blackie doggedly insisted:

"You give your word in the soddy, and I fought my bigness. That promise holds.

You can't shoot me down like a dog."

"But I can shoot you down like a mad dog," Hancey venomously corrected. "You lost your life when you committed that murder."

"I fought at the soddy to save them gals."

"And ran for it before we knew you were gone," harshly broke in Hancey.

"I quit when the game was up. I couldn't go with you folks, for then I'd have to fight it out with you. If I won in a fight with you, your friends would 'a' done for me."

Hancey rapidly thought it over, then commanded:

"Get up. We'll walk through the growth to the grass and I'll keep my promise to myself and to you. We'll shoot it out. If you're a better man than I with a gun, I shall go after my father. But I tell you now that you stand no chance. No more chance than you stand this second. Get up."

HE STEPPED back and Blackie slowly got to his feet, his black eyes glittering with sudden hope. There was no knife in the belt around the naked waist, but the fierce eyes suggested a desperate purpose. Hancey advanced the muzzle of the gun and ordered:

"Stick up your hands and face about."

Blackie obeyed sullenly. Hancey pressed the muzzle against the breed's back and, with his free hand, commenced searching the cowhide boots. Blackie winced with the first move.

"Another wriggle and you die here, instead of in the open," warned Hancey.

In the right boot he found a knife. Appropriating the weapon, he allowed his prisoner to stand at ease and turn about. He smiled slightly at the expression of baffled rage showing through the paint.

"You had a notion you'd get a chance to use the sticker," he told Blackie. "You haven't a chance on earth."

"Stick to your promise. We'll shoot it out on the grass. But you won't give me an even break."

"I'll toss a gun for you to go and get. We'll commence shooting the minute you pick it up. But you have no chance."

"Don't keep telling me that!" hoarsely cried Blackie. "You can't work any of that medicine on me. My mind's all white, even if I'm half red."

"I told White Killer I dreamed I saw him dead. He was born all white. He's dead."

"Dream and be damned! You'll never see me dead. Let's beat it. We can have it finished in ten minutes," growled Blackie.

Hancey motioned for him to pass through the doorway. Before Blackie could reach the opening, Hancey hissed a warning. The man froze in his tracks. Hancey whispered over his shoulder—

"Face of a Sioux showed through the ash!"

Blackie shivered and half turned to face his captor. He begged:

"For God's sake! Give me a gun! They'll rush us. I mustn't be caught alive. Death's one thing; prisoner of them devils is something awful."

"In good time," murmured Hancey. "There was only one man. He's seen nothing. He hasn't shouted. Sit down with your back to the wall while I take a look."

Outside, the birds were hopping about in the growth. Overhead, the buzzards were increasing in numbers, always watching for death and always finding what they looked for. Their wonderful vision, perfected for the sole purpose of discovering carrion, had long since told those many miles from the valley of the Little Blue that their winged brothers over the valley had found food. As those beyond the horizon read the news in the sky and swept in from all quarters, others more remote, discovered the movement to the river and winged in and, in turn, drew another ring after them.

A vague notion that humans found what they looked for flitted through Hancey's mind, as an upward glance through the small window detected the ominous scavengers. With a world filled with beauty and love, he had looked only for vengeance, and he had found it. The breed, belonging to no race, had looked for blood and booty, and he had found it.

The buzzards were oblivious to the mysteries of the sunrise and sunset and the butterflies, to grassy plains and the prairie rose and the stars. Their wonderful vision permitted them to find what they were looking for—a dead rat or a dead man. And on this sultry August day life was entirely to their liking.

Not daring to stand at the window, Hancey kneeled beneath it and found a chink between the logs. He depended on his ears to warn him if Blackie attempted to move. For a minute he saw nothing of the enemy, and yet he knew they must be near as there was no illusion as to the painted face he had briefly glimpsed.

Suddenly the face of a Sioux appeared from behind a clump of ash. The man was young and his face was eager. He had discovered something that led him into the growth and close to the cabin. His gaze was suspicious and yet puzzled. There was nothing in the abandoned pile of logs to suggest tenancy. Insect life hummed and buzzed in the narrow opening around the house. Butterflies followed the light through the doorway and turned about to regain the sun. The scout was lying on the ground with all but his head hidden from view. The spectacle weirdly suggested a head detached from the trunk, yet alive and rolling about and always searching for victims.

Hancey watched until the head vanished; then he turned to Blackie and whispered—

"He's gone."

Blackie shook his head and murmured:

"Not far. He'll come back. He doesn't believe any one is in here, but he isn't sure. If he was sure, he'd come and looked in. He's alone, but his friends are near. He's gone to signal. If they wasn't close by, he'd a raised a howl."

Hancey stared at the open door, his first thought being to leave the shelter and bolt for the river and the opposite bank. He dared not risk it. The cabin might be surrounded, and he might be pounced upon and made a prisoner before he could use his guns and decently get himself killed.

He abruptly ordered:

"Go down in that hole and see if one can crawl under the bottom log on the river side. Earth's washed away at that end."

He stressed the command by starting to cock the revolver in his hand. Without any hesitation Blackie pulled off his boots and crawled into the opening. The sill logs at this end were clear of the ground from the spring wash. Hancey, standing by the hole, had no trouble in tracing his movements as he worked to the river wall. Through a small window a growth of willows could be seen. These blocked a view of the stream.

When the breed reached the log, Hancey thrust his head through the opening and saw a hand appear from under the log. Then the other hand came into view, both clawing back the dirt and enlarging the opening. Hancey waited until the coarse black hair of the breed came through the opening, quickly followed by an arm and shoulder. He smiled grimly as he realized that the breed intended to try his luck in gaining and swimming the river.

Hancey made a slight hissing sound. Blackie twisted his head and glared up into the thin dark face. Hancey thrust a revolver through the opening and drew a bead and motioned for the man to draw back and come up through the floor. Scowling murderously, Blackie disappeared. In a few moments he was emerging from the hole. With a finger to his lips he advanced softly to Hancey, who halted him with the gun against his painted ribs. In a whisper the breed informed—

"We can crawl out and swim the river easy."

Had Hancey been alone he would have ventured. Blackie's presence deterred him from taking a double risk. He decided:

"We'll wait here. Sit down where you are."

BLACKIE had barked the back of his right hand in his frantic efforts to provide himself a chance to escape. He started to wipe the blood on his leggings, but did not complete the gesture. Instead he cocked his ear and rolled his eyes to warn of the approach of some one through the growth. Hancey had heard nothing. As he moved toward the peephole under the south window the breed whispered:

"Give me a piece of cloth for a sling. If there's only one man I'll show you a good trick."

Hancey, instantly suspicious of any suggestion emanating from his enemy, hesitated for a moment, then tossed his handkerchief. Blackie made his hand bleed more freely and proceeded to stain the handkerchief with blood. Hancey at the peephole saw the face of the scout again close by. Now the man was standing. Blackie knew by Hancey's slight tremor of excitement that the Sioux had returned. He invited death by coming noiselessly to his feet.

The gun instantly swept from the peephole to cover the painted chest, and the breed, in pantomime, was ordered to be seated. Blackie stubbornly shook his head. Clasping his hands behind him he advanced. Hancey now had another gun out and he stuck both muzzles against the breed's stomach and chest. Blackie inclined his head and whispered:

"Give me a gun and I'll bag that feller."

"I can do that. Go back, or I'll shoot."

"A shot will bring 'em down on you. There's others near. Give me a gun and I'll fool that feller."

"And then run!"

"Not 'less the road's open. If I run they'll chase me. I'd rather take my chances with the Sioux than with you. I'm going to git that feller out there, or die right here in my tracks. If you shoot me, you're done for. That feller'll duck to cover and set up a howling that'll fetch the whole kit and kaboodle of 'em down on you. Now give me a gun, or I'll yell."

Hancey glared into the savage face and read a grim determination to carry out the threat. He could stop an outcry with a shot from the right hand gun clamped over the strongly beating heart, and thereby advertised his presence in the cabin."

"Give me a gun and I'll try my luck running, after bagging that man. They'll chase me. If I've got to go to hell flying, I'm going that way. My back will be to you. If I start to face about you can shoot me."

Hancey twisted his head and beheld the scout looking behind him as if waiting for some one to come up. Without moving Blackie urged:

"I can fool him. He won't shoot. I can kill him without shooting by busting him over the head with the barrel. If any one's chased, it'll be me. They're on this side of the river. You'll have your chance to cross."

"What's your game?"

Blackie slowly stepped back and drew his hands from behind him and deftly tied the ends of the bloodstained handkerchief through his belt. Into this improvised sling he thrust his right hand. Then he whispered:

"He'll never reckon I've got a gun. I'm painted. I talk Sioux."

Desperate and suddenly reckless beyond all measure, yet convinced that the diversion caused by Blackie's withdrawal from the cabin might afford an escape across the river, Hancey rose to his feet and presented a revolver, muzzle first and clapped the muzzle of the second gun against the painted forehead.

Blackie slipped the weapon inside the bloodstained handkerchief and carefully arranged the cloth so as to cover the barrel. He had all the appearance of being unarmed and of carrying a disabled hand in a sling. Before Hancey could prevent him he groaned horribly. The scout vanished.

"Part of my game," he hoarsely whispered. "Now I'm going to call out for water in Teton Sioux. Keep your shirt on."

With that he staggered heavily toward the door, groaning and calling:

"Water! Water!"

It was too late to shoot, and Hancey with finger on the trigger, waited. Blackie gained the door, groaning and muttering and dragging one leg as if severely wounded in that member. Once he passed through the doorway Hancey dropped at the peephole.

Now the young Sioux was standing clear of the growth, his rifle half raised and his fierce gaze eagerly watching the half breed's halting approach. Blackie raised his left hand, palm outward, and staggered forward. The scout advanced his rifle and held the breed off.

"Who are you, painted like White Killer?" demanded the young man.

"The man who killed him. I wear his paint. I will take his place in Big Elk's band. I will take his name. White men shot me."

As he spoke he sank to his knees, his head rolling. The scout's eyes glittered brightly. This was his first path of any consequence. He had taken part in the raid on the Little Blue station, but had counted no distinctive coup. Here was a chance to have himself talked about at many camp-fires. For the man who brought in alive the slayer of the White Killer would receive great honor. Yet he was suspicious. The man was unarmed; he had no doubt as to that. Still he sensed something was wrong. He asked:

"You want water. There is the river. You could drink there."

As he spoke he forgot for a second and gestured with the rifle barrel toward the Little Blue. Instantly the bandaged hand exploded, and with death glazing his eyes in a fixed stare of surprise the dead man plunged forward and on top of the bowed figure. Before Hancey could recover his wits, Blackie was erect, with the dead man draped over his bowed head and shoulders and slipping to the ground. The breed was in the growth as the corpse struck the earth.

As Blackie ran through the growth he shouted loudly several times in Teton Sioux:

"There is a white man in the house by the river! Come quick and catch the white man!"

There could be only one interpretation of these wild cries and Hancey muttered:

"Rung in a cold deck! Damn him! He's outgamed me!"

Then he leaped to the door, thinking to run around the river and swim for it. The enemy was closer than he had thought. Between his two visits to the cabin the young scout had signaled warriors to close in. Excited cries were sounding along the river bank on each side of the cabin. Hancey drew back, trying to decide what would be the best mode of defense. The door was supported by leaning against the logs, the top hinge of rawhide being broken. He could not defend the place. He could not leave and race to the river so long as Sioux were on the bank.

HANCEY steadied himself by the thought that he could not be taken alive. He had two revolvers. The men rapidly approaching would find the dead scout and seek to trail his killer. Some, at least, would range the growth and beyond. Some would enter the cabin. If he could postpone discovery until the band split he could make a good fight. Already men were crashing toward the cabin from all directions, shouting loudly.

The first two to arrive saw the dead scout at the edge of the growth and ran to investigate. Hancey tossed Blackie's boots through the broken floor and followed them and crawled to the north wall. He was in time to see the legs of a man pass the opening that Blackie had made. This was large enough for Hancey's slim figure to pass through. He heard the poles give and spring under the moccasined feet of three men. Horrified lest he be caught trapped under the floor, he gently squirmed through the hole and crawled toward the willows.

Inside the cabin Big Elk and two men were standing motionless. The gaze of each was fixed on the crumbs of mold and dirt on the pole flooring around the hole. Their heads swung about in an exchange of glances. One man stepped to the doorway and swept his gaze along the bottom log. The overflow from the spring branch had not disturbed the dirt under the logs on this side. Big Elk softly kneeled and held his ear close to the floor.

The third man stepped to the small north window and immediately collapsed with a shattered skull. The explosion of the heavy gun held the two remaining warriors transfixed as if they had been figures carved from wood. Big Elk recovered first and, with a terrific war cry, leaped for the door. He shouted for his men to make the river bank.

A few yapping cries responded from different points where several of his followers were seeking the man who had killed the young scout, and whose hurried flight had left a trail toward the west. Big Elk, who was a very brave man, did not wait for reinforcements but ran around one end of the cabin while his companion followed more cautiously. The Elk was the first to discover the opening under the logs. While he could scarcely hope the white man was still there, he paused to fire several revolver shots into the hole.

By this time Hancey was almost across the river, with cottonwoods and willows waiting to give him shelter. He had crossed by wading and swimming, carrying his two guns high above his head. Big Elk, first to discover him, opened fire with his rifle. His companion joined him. Beholding their quarry crawling up the opposite bank, they dropped their guns and armed only with knives leaped into the stream.

Hancey, inside the growth, sat on a log and waited. Big Elk's companion was the better man of the two in water and, floundering and swimming, he took the lead. When he was within twenty feet of Hancey's hiding place the latter stepped into view and brought down a gun. The man tried to duck under water. He turned and started back, his right arm hanging helpless. He presented an easy target and Hancey raised the gun for a finishing shot, as Big Elk had gone under and was swimming to the south bank.

The wounded man was permitted to escape with his shattered arm, as five more warriors were now on the bank. Big Elk came up and shouted for these men to follow him across the river. Then he turned about to pursue the white man. Before he had taken three strokes a brave on the bank shouted a warning and pointed to what appeared to be a dust cloud moving lazily along the road.

Two Sioux men climbed to the roof of the cabin and a third went up a cottonwood. The man in the tree yelled down that armed white men were riding up the stage road, making west. Big Elk regained the bank and ordered a retreat to the ponies south of the growth.

The men riding up the valley were citizens of Gage County and the Big Sandy under command of W. H. Stoner, with John Gilbert as lieutenant. The Sioux did not care to meet this citizens' posse just yet and, regaining their ponies, they rapidly rode back to the Elk crossing. Before they were more than a few miles on their way, a Cheyenne man, flogging his pony, raced to meet them and announced that soldiers were coming down to the Elk from the Little Blue station. This last information caused rejoicing rather than fear, for it was the hostiles' original plan to fall back to the Republican and trap the soldiers who were certain to be sent after them.

HANCEY met the citizens' posse and was provided with a horse. He rode with the men to be merged with Captain Murphy's troops from Fort Kearny. Immediately after meeting the posse, he commenced asking questions, anxious to learn the fate of his friends. A Beatrice man made him very happy by saying the Strongs, Freedoms and Brackets had gotten safely away. He also was much pleased to learn that his wounded horse had caught up with the Bracket wagon. Knowing his friends would believe him dead he requested every one whom the posse met to carry word of his escape to the mouth of the Big Sandy.

The citizens numbered thirty-four and were coming to the rescue of the valley. There was the possibility, even probability, of war parties striking the homes they had left; but it was characteristic of the Nebraska pioneer to respond promptly when the border was endangered. Hancey's great desire was to find his friends, to find Ruth Strong.

The settlers found Captain Murphy and his troops at Pawnee Ranch, at the mouth of a creek by that name, and were able to inform him that the Indians had made a clean sweep, excepting the Kiowa station, and the Little Blue station, from Hackney's ranch to Pawnee Creek.

Hancey was one of those detailed to help bury the dead at the Eubanks ranch at the Narrows, and he found the task more terrible than any amount of fighting. He would never talk of the sights he saw there, but ever afterwards he was eager to risk capture for the privilege of coming within revolver range of the Indians. He saw the Constable train at the Little Blue station and helped to spill a great quantity of liquor when some of the men would have quenched their thirst too assiduously.

He continued with the mixed band of settlers and soldiers in their pursuit of the Indians south of the Elk. In the retreat, when the Indians attempted to spring their trap, he barely escaped from the sandy draw in which Constable, the owner of the wrecked train, was killed.

Throughout this brief campaign under Captain Murphy he was watching for a glimpse of Blackie. He had hoped the man would be driven to taking refuge with the troops. He could still hear the breed, shouting in a red dialect as he ran through the grove after killing the Sioux scout.

He knew the Sioux men had been told a white victim awaited them in the cabin. He did not blame Blackie, however, for trying to send death to him. It was only a part of the grim game of hide and seek.

But Hancey could find no trace of his man, ride and hunt as he would. Flogged on by his great hate he elected to ride with Murphy's troops to Kearny, instead of hastening to find his friends and sweetheart.

There was much excitement in and around the fort. Hancey heard for the first time of the Plum Creek massacre. A man had come through from the congested Julesburg ferry with word that a hundred passengers there would be wiped out by the Cheyennes unless troops immediately went to their rescue. This man said that the last coach from the east reached Colorado on August fifteenth.

Coaches from the West were being held on the South Platte, or had turned back. General Robert B. Mitchell marched with a large force to relieve the terrible tension. He moved up the Platte before striking for the big camp of hostiles supposed to be on the Republican.

Hancey had decided to ride with the troops, convinced that Blackie was somewhere on the South Platte on his way to Colorado. Then a chance talk with a freighter changed his plans. The freighters were determined to carry on their business, regardless of the hostiles and despite the fact that Holladay's stagecoach line had been discontinued.

Jim Blase, a Missourian who could snap the head off a chicken with his long lash as neatly as any of his calling, was the man with whom Hancey happened to talk. There was but little amity in the conversation at the start, as Blase halted in front of Hancey and derisively remarked:

"One of these hell roaring gamblin' fellers, uh? Too proud to git your hands dirty."

"I'm a hunter," coldly replied Hancey.

Blase grinned and prodded—

"Hunting for a cold deck, most likely."

"Most likely you're a liar in saying that," quietly replied Hancey. "You make a move with that whip and I'll stitch lead buttons up and down your shirt front."

"Honin' to drink blood, uh?" murmured Blase, and he estimated his chances of using the butt of his whip handle before one of the slim hands could pull a gun. "You didn't oughter call me a liar, just because you're wearing two guns."

"I said most likely, just as you did about a cold deck. I'm hunting for a man. I'm in a hurry. I don't want to waste time with a mule skinner. There's lots of folks here at the fort you can talk to without bothering me."

Blase studied him thoughtfully and decided that the risk of tapping with the whip handle was too great, until the fellow was off his guard. He yawned and remarked:

"You mind to be well heeled when you find your man. What's the unfortunate cuss' name?"

"He's called Blackie. Used to run in Tisk's gang on the north fork. I hoped to find him here at the fort."

"Blackie!" exclaimed Blase, and all hostile purpose vanished. "Cheyenne half-breed?"

"You've seen him, or heard of him lately?" eagerly cried Hancey.

Now the freighter could have felled him easily; but he ignored the opportunity and replied—

"He passed through here a week or so ago."

"North or south fork? I've asked and asked and learned nothing."

"Folks too much worked up to keep in mind the coming and going of a breed. Men's women and children been killed. Women are held prisoners by the Injuns. A man hunting Blackie is mighty small pertaters just now."

"I've had quite a bit of fighting down on the Little Blue. I killed quite a few Indians. I was a prisoner with this Blackie in the camp on the Elk. I've helped bury the dead in the valley, and went with Murphy's men till the Indians drove us back," patiently explained Hancey. "This particular breed murdered my father back on the river some years ago. I want him bad."

"Son, that's bigger pertaters," gravely said Blase. "You wait here a minute till I talk with some of my men."

HANCEY waited thirty minutes before the Missourian returned. The freighter tersely reported:

"Went up the South Platte. Jo Pease talked with him. Saw him join on with an outfit of three trains. If the 'Rapahoes are cutting up tricks between Julesburg and Denver your man's prob'ly stuck at the crossing and waiting for a clear road. You really want that feller?"

"Been hunting him for seven years," was the savage reply.

Then Hancey sketched his tragic story. When he finished, Blase stared at him almost incredulously, expectorated skillfully, and declared:

"Either you're one of the slickest liars that ever come into the West, or you've had mighty bad luck in your hunting. There's spots in your story that strain my head a bit, but I believe most of it. We're pulling out in the morning. If you want to ride with us, you're welcome. I can furnish you with a good hoss. If your man's waiting for you at Julesburg, I wouldn't miss seeing you meet him for fifty yoke of prime oxen. Just one question, young feller. Are you sure about being caught and busting loose from the Injuns in the way you said?"

"Quite sure."

"Then I must believe it. But don't tell that part to the boys. Now come with me and we'll pick out a good hoss. We'll be glad of two extra guns with a young hell fire using 'em."

Threatened with starvation, Denver and other Colorado towns were eager to pay the rapidly climbing prices for foodstuffs, with the transportation charges returning an unusually fat profit to freighters who could get through.

With flour on its way to twenty-five dollars a hundred and other commodities similarly advancing in price, provisions must be had regardless of cost. Ranches on the South Platte and its tributaries were being raided and burned, and the stock run off. Grasshoppers were devouring the crops in the same area. According to a telegram from Governor Evans of Colorado, the hostiles were killing people within thirty miles of Denver.

Elbridge Gerry, Indian trader and

rancher on Crow creek, rode sixty-five miles through hostile country to tell the people of Denver that Long Chin and Man Shot by the Ree, friendly Cheyennes, had warned him to flee, as a thousand Apache, Commanche, Cheyennes and Arapaho fighting men were camped on Beaver creek a hundred and twenty-five miles from Denver. This big band was expected to make a clean sweep of the south fork.

According to Gerry, the old men of these tribes were for peace, but the young men were determined to follow the red path until all the whites were killed, or driven from the central plains.

The scattered ranches on the Arkansas had to meet the danger unaided, or seek refuge in flight, as there were no troops to spare for their protection. Stagecoaches were withdrawn and the mail for the mountains rerouted. The troops along the Platte were insufficient, as the Federal Government was throwing all its strength into the scales against the Confederacy. Burned coaches and wagon trains, burned ranches, dead cattle and horses, dead men and women, testified to the initial success of the uprising. The scavengers of the air were continually swooping to earth or rising on heavy wings.

EARLY in the morning Hancey, mounted on a good horse, rode beside Blase at the head of the big outfit. There were more than two hundred wagons heavily guarded by extra men. An old plainsman in fringed buckskin cantered up beside Blase on an Indian pony. Blase's long face was very grave as he greeted the old man by asking—

"Old Sol, what's our chances?"

"Mebbe a clear road all the way. But if they strike before you make the Julesburg Crossing, it'll be a fighting corral all the way. There's a mighty big camp down on the Solomon. Southern Cheyennes, Sioux an' 'Rapahoes. Spotted Tail and Pawnee Killer's with 'em. Even now they may be moving ag'in all points on the Platte, as far east and south as the Big Sandy. If they split in small bands, we can stand 'em off. But if they strike the South Platte in a bunch, we'll be most mortally peppered an' all hell can't save this outfit."

"All the Injuns can't stop this outfit from going through," growled Blase. "You ride on ahead, Sol. There won't be any serious doin's till we strike the forks."

"You'll be stopped mighty smart, Jim Blase, if Spotted Tail an' Pawnee Killer an' t'other chiefs can control the young bucks an' keep 'em from scatterin'. I've lived among 'em an' know," answered Old Sol.

With that he flourished his Indian quirt and rode on up the road and out of sight of the head of the outfit.

Blase turned to Hancey and grimly remarked:

"You heard the cheerin' news. Clear road, mebbe. A couple of thousand howling Injuns surrounding us, prob'ly. Still want to ride along?"

"You have enough fighting men here to lick all the Indians you'll meet. If it comes to close fighting, you'll find me mighty helpful."

"Injuns or no Injuns, you lug around a mean opinion of yourself!" exclaimed Blase.

During the first half of the journey the trains strung out in a long procession, with scouts riding far ahead and on the left flank. The ruins of Fred Smith's ranch and store, nine miles below Plum Creek, was one of the grim reminders of red savagery. A hired man was killed and the stock run off. Smith and his wife, unsuspecting of any danger, happened to start in a light wagon for Fort Kearny two hours before the Indians came up. About the same time the Plum Creek massacre was adding a bloody page to border history.

Frank Morton from Sidney, Iowa, and ten men, with ten four-mule wagons, were surprised a mile west of the mouth of the creek. The men were killed and Mrs. Morton was taken prisoner. The old road passed within a mile of where the victims were buried by officers of the Seventh

Iowa Cavalry. As the train was crossing the creek a driver told Hancey:

"I was at the Thomas ranch when they was killed."

He did not consider it necessary to be more definite, as every man was thinking of the tragedy and all eyes were turned toward the scene of the massacre. The driver continued:

"Lieutenant Bowen 'n others was at the ranch. There was a hundred painted braves riding 'round the train, hooting'n shooting. The outfit didn't make much of a fight. Didn't seem to have any guns but revolvers, and didn't do much of anything with them. All but three wagons was burned. Some folks are blaming Colonel Summers. The *Republican* just printed a piece about how the telegraph man at the Plum Creek station, in plain sight of the killings, telegraphed Kearny all about it at seven o'clock in the morning, or just after it happened. Summers started four hours later and didn't git here till ten o'clock at night. Eleven hours for thirty odd miles. I'd made it quicker leading a lame mule."

Broken and partly burned wagons were seen at frequent intervals. Some had been loaded with corn and some with mining machinery. Others had carried drygoods, groceries, or household furnishings. All these cargoes were spoiled and scattered, with the exception of some of the heavier pieces of machinery which the raiders could not destroy for lack of time or patience. Enough loot was strewn over the prairie to fill many a red lodge, and what impressed Hancey was how little the hostiles had profited by their killings.

Even the ranch stock was wantonly butchered and left to attract the buzzards. Hancey now had an opportunity to wonder at these scavengers. Quartering the heavens at such a height as to be invisible to the eye they would suddenly be floating overhead without perceptible wing motion, miraculously appearing from nowhere and drawing circling cones of their gruesome fellows after them.

Until it had passed Plum Creek the outfit frequently met solitary wagons and men and women on horses madly making down the military road to Fort Kearny. Small freight trains, but a few days out from the fort, turned back. Blase's scouts saw no hostiles, but after leaving Plum Creek, few eastbound fugitives, or wagons, were met. Those outfits which did reach Kearny represented conditions on the South fork to be so dangerous as to discourage further freighting until after the Federal Government could take the situation in hand.

William Bent, the veteran trader, was even then writing letters to the Cheyenne chiefs, urging them to make peace. Even as the danger of the road increased and Blase was moving his outfit in parallel columns, the Cheyenne chiefs were sending a letter to the Indian agent, Major S. G. Colley, agreeing to peace, provided peace was made with their allies, the Kiowas, Commanches, Arapahoes, Apaches and Sioux.

Black Kettle and the other Cheyenne men signing this letter also urged that several red prisoners they believed were being held in Denver be exchanged for seven white prisoners in the Cheyenne village on the Solomon. But there was to be no peace until the winter of the new year.

Old Sol came into the armed camp of nights, and each visit reported no hostiles in sight. Some of the scouts brought alarming stories, after glimpsing a red lookout posted on a hill to watch the road. At Camp Cottonwood, nearly fifty miles from Fort Kearny, Blase found a small outfit about to turn back to Kearny. The hundred miles to the Julesburg crossing was beyond the courage of the wagon boss, although the danger was no greater at that particular time than what he had experienced on his trip up the river. He was glad to accept Blase's invitation and to join the Missourian.

Every ten or twelve miles was a stage station, now abandoned. Between these stations were ranches where necessities could be bought and "pilgrim quarters" where travelers could secure a bed. From Kearny up the Platte the Overland

Telegraph poles had kept the Blase outfit company, and a branch line accompanied them up the South fork. Over the singing wires came the news of General Hood's desperate efforts to withstand Sherman and the Army of Tennessee, now battering at the doors of Atlanta. Eastward flashed the news of the red uprising.

DEAF to these talking wires, the Blase outfit moved on. There was no opposition, except as Indian scouts exchanged shots at long range with the white scouts. At the last camp before reaching the Julesburg crossing Old Sol brought in a Cheyenne scalp, which he danced around a camp-fire. Blase issued a liberal ration of liquor, and the old plainsman was followed by madly whooping mule skinners.

Blase grinned and swore and encouraged the mad antics. Then he noticed Hancey seated apart by another fire and taking no interest in the celebration. He crossed to him and found him carefully oiling his guns.

"Too high 'n' mighty to dance a scalp?" he asked.

"A great fuss over one dead Indian. I left a dozen undanced scalps down on the Little Blue."

"By hen! You'll git me to believing that yarn if you keep on," jeered Blase.

Hancey glanced up sharply and smiled amiably as he said:

"You're on the road to getting drunk, Jim. I've seen many a game lost because a fellow got careless when he believed he had the pot won. One more leg to go and then you'll be at the crossing and can get drunk as lords. Don't let the men have any more rum till we reach Julesburg."

"Hell!" roared Blase. "Telling me how to run this outfit? Giving me pointers on how to act in Injun country? I'm thinking you're mostly talk and don't know how to use them guns."

"Jim, you can't quarrel with me. You couldn't if you were sober. You've been a good friend."

"Soft talk," sneered Blase. "I've a notion to slap your thin face. What would you do then?"

Hancey's eyes widened for a moment; then he stared down at his guns and hastily thrust them in his belt. Lifting his head he quietly replied:

"Nothing. It would hurt my pride like sin. I'm not used to having my face slapped. But I've said you had acted the friend, and from a friend I'll take anything except treachery. And if a man is treacherous, of course, he isn't a friend any longer. Go ahead with the slap; then stop the drinking."

Blase drew back his open hand and for a count of ten Hancey waited for the blow, his gaze fixed on the ground.

"I can't do it," growled Blase, dropping his hand. "Your trick with words ties me all up. But I'm going to be on hand when you meet up with that Blackie. I want to see how you carry yourself then."

"If you're present you'll see me kill a murderer."

Hancey rose and walked to the south side of the camp. Blase followed him, still angry that soft words had disarmed him.

"I'd like you all right," he began, "if you didn't always talk so cocksure. You're always allowing how good you are with a six-shooter. Folks out here like to see some shooting before hearing so much about it."

Hancey was not to be baited and kept his gaze fixed on the ground. With a sarcastic laugh Blase added—

"Young feller, to hear you talk, a man might think you was a young hellion that's up in the gold camps that's called the Rattler, along of being so deadly."

Without turning his head or raising his voice Hancey confessed:

"Jim, I am the Rattler. But I don't want it known. It's not a good name to carry."

"You damn young liar!" shouted Blase.

Hancey tripped him flat on his face as a spurt of flame came from the grass sixty feet from their position, and scarcely had the wagon master hit the ground than the two guns were out and exploding so rapidly as to sound like one long drawn out detonation.

Blase got to his feet as the last shots were being fired.

"What'n hell you knock my feet—What you shooting at?" he babbled, and his men began running to that side of the camp.

"Indian out there. Think I got him. After I load I'll go and look."

"There was a rifle shot just as you knocked me over," cried Blase, his wits clearing. "By golly, young fire eater! But you can work a brace of pistols! I'm sobering up. I take back all the mean things I said. If you can shoot as straight as you shoot fast you're either the Rattler or his boss."

No more shots came from the grass and, after Hancey had reloaded, he and several of the men crawled away from the wagons. They found the red scout, still clutching his rifle. They dragged him within range of the firelight and discovered three wounds, one of which had caused instant death. He had been lying on his face when he fired his rifle and Hancey had shot by guess.

When Hancey refused to touch the scalp, Old Sol dexterously removed it and began dancing wildly. The wagon crews would have joined in, and some began clamoring for more liquor. But Blase had been completely sobered by his narrow escape from death. He ordered the scouts to go out and the fires to be extinguished. The night passed quietly and on the next day the outfit made and crossed the South Platte at Julesburg.

CHAPTER XII

THE SHOWDOWN

BESIDES the station, built of cedar logs from Cottonwood Cañon a hundred miles away, there were the stage company's large store and warehouse, stables, corrals, the express and telegraph offices and a scattering of smaller structures. Among the latter were several shanties which offered accommodations for pilgrims—food, liquor and beds.

When the Blase outfit made the crossing the little settlement was augmented by several eastbound outfits, waiting for more wagons to join them before proceeding down the river. Some of the wagon masters were reluctant to advance, regardless of numbers; nor did they care to risk turning back to Denver. They were bottled up. The arrival of Blase was greeted with cheers and excited queries. Had his outfit met any Indians? Did he plan to go through to Denver?

He reported a quiet passage and related Hancey's slaying of the lone Indian scout as being the only instance of an enemy's approaching within gunshot of the combined trains. When Old Sol produced and brandished a scalp and gave credit for it to Hancey the young man suddenly found himself very popular, almost a hero. Several oldtimers remembered him as the Rattler, and before nightfall he had a reputation for being an Indian fighter, a bad man and a gambler.

The boisterous homage disgusted and disquieted him. He had hoped to lose his nickname. He feared that the talk of his exploits would reach Blackie, if the breed was in or near Julesburg. He had expected to press his quest anonymously, but quickly discovered that he was the most talked of man at the crossing. To escape the curious he entered a shanty and seated himself in a poorly lighted corner.

Some three thousand wagons of freight, guarded by nearly five thousand men, were to make the crossing during the year. Nearly thirty thousand mules, horses and oxen were required to haul these wagons. In addition to the independent freighters, the Overland Express Company's twenty thousand wagons were hauling fifty thousand tons from the Missouri to the mountains in 1864, in addition to providing stagecoaches for passengers. This month of August was marking the apex of the season's traffic, when the tribes took the warpath.

From his dark corner Hancey could

glimpse through the small unwashed window men of almost every nationality. Their lethal weapons would have filled a small armory. There were bull whackers, mule skinners, wagon masters, hide hunters, veterans of the plains and the mountains, merchants, miners, capitalists, refugees from the East, deserters from two armies and border garrisons, bad men from everywhere; and all were bottled up and waiting for the allied tribes to strike and hoping the Federal Government would come to their succor before such a visitation.

Their true situation was bad enough, but rumors painted it many times worse. Men fleeing from small bands of Indians made the crossing on exhausted horses and announced a thousand red fighting men had cut the road down the river, or had blocked the road to Denver and were imperiling the safety of that city.

According to his fixed habit, Hancey ordered a drink and inquired of the proprietor about Blackie. The man had been too busy to notice individuals. His flour was running low and he feared it would go to fifty cents a pound. At another time he might have amused his customer with his profanely expressed theory that the freighters had stirred up the war so they might boost the present rate of seventeen cents a pound for each hundred miles. He was even inclined to believe that Ben Holladay was "making somethin' " out of it.

With his untouched drink as an excuse for lingering, Hancey watched from the window, hoping to see Blackie pass. It was merely a faint hope, for he knew Blackie would leave if he learned his enemy was near. Only a deaf man could have failed to hear the talk being tossed about concerning the Rattler and the scalp he had taken.

"How long you going to stay here?" asked the proprietor.

"Don't know. Ought to be in the mountains this minute. But I'm keen to find that old acquaintance I was asking about, that Cheyenne breed they call Blackie."

The proprietor was in the act of tacking up a sign that read—

GENUING BORBUN FOR SAIL

He scratched his head reflectively and mused:

"Name of Blackie don't mean nothing to Bial Comel, which same is me. But a breed is another pair of boots."

"Well, go on," prompted Hancey. "You've seen a breed?"

"I've seen lots of 'em. You don't take to your liquor?"

"So well I want a lot!"

Hancey clapped twenty dollars on the table.

"And you keep it till I call for it. You've seen a breed?"

"As a rule they clutter up this crossing. They all cleared out when the trouble busted loose along of those freighters stirring up this row, so they can charge more for hauling freight. Breeds was 'fraid they'd be mistook for hostiles. When the Injuns fetch us a fuss, we can't tell friendly from white, and a lot of friendlies have been rubbed out, I reckon."

"No doubt about it," agreed Hancey, now realizing it was useless to try hurrying the man.

Comel paused and stared approvingly at his new sign, and with a chuckle informed:

"Man tried to tell me I oughter spell 'genuing' with a 'j'. Yes, this breed I seen passed through here week or so ago. Dark complected, but dressed like a white man and would pass for one, if you didn't squint too close at his high cheek bones and eyes. Them was all Injun. Talked like white man, too. Just as much as I do."

Hancey restrained his impatience with difficulty. Comel made the whisky sign more secure, then walked to the front of the shanty to view it. Returning to the short bar on which he served victuals and drink, he hoisted in place a keg of Canadian high wine, colored to resemble whisky. Then he faced the corner and secured the twenty dollars and continued—

"Such a critter as I've described was in this very place for a drink."

"If he's the man I want to see and you can help me find him, I'll give you twenty dollars for your trouble."

He reinforced his offer by spinning a gold coin on the table.

"He didn't look he was worth four bits to any man," said Comel. "But that's your business. But how'll I git the twenty, if you hear my talk and then go off and find your man and forgit to come back?"

"You have your money. Now where's the breed?"

Hancey flipped the coin on the short bar.

Comel took note of the two guns in Hancey's belt and stipulated—

"If the feller I mean ain't the one you mean, there ain't going to be any hard feelings."

"None whatever. Go ahead and talk."

COMEL advanced to the table and in a low voice began:

"About two miles up the river is a small ranch where half a dozen men are staying. I reckon they're Rebs who got sick of the fighting. They come to the crossing together and rode away together. They've been down here for grub'n whisky several times. Trade in here, but they don't do any drinking down here. I know where they're stopping from their talk. I'd say they're a hard lot. I'd say that ranch is a good place for you to keep away from, young man."

"Fine. Now what's the breed got to do with those men?" snapped Hancey.

"Last time he was in here he was asking me about ranch-houses nearest the crossing. He's scared of the Injuns, even if he is a breed. I told him 'bout the one two miles up the river and he seemed mighty interested. He got on his hoss and rode away and he ain't been back, so, I'm thinking he went up there. You stick right here in my place and most likely he'll be drifting in."

"Thanks."

Hancey rose and hurried outdoors.

He made his way to the Blase camp and found the Missourian planning to pull out for Denver in the morning. When the wagon master glimpsed Hancey, he boisterously greeted:

" 'Fraid I'd lost you, Rattler. You'll go through with us?"

"Maybe. But I'm taking a short ride first. I want to borrow the horse I rode from Kearny. I'll pay the price, so if I get killed you won't be out anything."

"Pay nothing! Take the hoss 'n' welcome, but I wish you was starting with us."

"I don't expect to go more'n two miles. If I come back I'll either ride after you, or leave the horse in Holladay's corral for you to pick up on the return trip."

Blase had been celebrating his arrival at the crossing, but his tough Missouri head was clear enough for him to be suspicious. He stared at Hancey closely and demanded:

"See here, young fire eater. Your ride going to take you into trouble? If it is some of us boys will go along."

"Oh, no, no. Nothing like that. I can do the business quicker if I go alone."

"Then what you mean by hinting you mayn't come back? Darn your young hide! I have it! You've hit the trail of the breed you've been so keen to catch up with. I'll be in on that, if it stops me from making Denver.

Hancey endeavored to argue him out of the notion and lied eloquently, but suspicion was firmly planted in a very stubborn head. Without heeding Hancey's talk, Blase called Jo Pease and curtly announced:

"Away for the day, mebbe two days. You watch things. If any drunken rows bust loose I'll do to your ears what Slade did to old Jules.' " Then to Hancey he said, "You trail after me."

Ignoring Hancey's insistence that the errand was a one man job, he led the way to the herd and selected two mounts and had the herd boy saddle them. Next he went to the nearest mule skinner and borrowed his revolver, making two for his belt. Grinning broadly he turned to Hancey and said:

"Duller'n ditch water here. Everybody too scared to have a rip roaring drunk. Hope you'n' me will be lucky enough to find some fun."

Realizing there was no shaking him off, Hancey waited till they were clear of the wagons and crowd; then he reined in. He briefly explained what he hoped to find at the small ranch up the river.

"That's a good talk," heartily endorsed Blase. "Bet they're Missouri border scum—and I've always hankered to take a whack at 'em! I'd done it long 'fore this if it hadn't been for the freight profits and the old woman waiting for me back home. The best way is to ride in shooting, and look 'em over afterwards."

Hancey sternly insisted that he would forego the trip unless he was allowed to dictate their mode of procedure.

"We know nothing about these men, except what Comel told me. We can't murder them for being deserters from the Southern Army. We're taking no fight to them; just looking for Blackie. And if he's there, it'll all be over, short and sweet. All you do is to stand by and see that I get a square deal. If the breed isn't there we'll stop to rest a bit, or long enough to learn if he's gone for good, or expected to return. I'll ask for him as if he was a friend of mine. Do you understand? Will you agree not to make a row?"

"I'm game even for peace," sighed Blase, "but it'll be a dis'p'intment. We'll hope the cuss is there."

"Another thing," cautioned Hancey. "I don't even know if the breed Comel saw is the one I want. So if you see a breed you keep calm and smiling. If he's my man you'll mighty soon know it."

"Once more, all right, son. You're running the outfit. I'm only a herder. Now let's stop chinning and be riding."

THEY followed the trail for two miles at an easy pace and reined in on sighting a small ranch-house a quarter of a mile back from the river. Two men were lying outside the door. One of these came up on his elbow and turned his head to the house as the horsemen approached at a walk. Four men quickly emerged from the house and stared sharply at the riders. Then two went indoors while the others remained outside.

"Gone in to keep us covered from the windows," murmured Hancey.

His thoughts dropped back through the years to the group outside the cookhouse on the South Loup.

"There was six," muttered Blase. "See your man among 'em?"

"No. He may be inside. You keep back. Be digging a stone from your nag's shoe."

"While you scoot ahead and catch a bullet from the winder if the breed is in there. What'n hell you take me for? Now this is what we'll do. I'll ride ahead at a fast clip while you come up slow and lazylike. The breed don't know me from Adam and—" But Hancey already had taken the lead and was riding to the house.

"Good day, gentlemen," he called out when twenty feet from the door; and he slipped from his horse and stood with the animal between him and the windows.

"Howdy," grunted one of the men, and the four stared at him sharply. "Who might you be?"

"My name's Peters. My friend is Jim Blase from Missouri. We're making for the Latham crossing."

As he talked he led his horse closer to the group and cast a sidelong glance at the windows.

"Didn't know but what you was a law officer looking for somebody," lazily remarked another of the group.

His companions laughed at this. The man who appeared to be the leader frowned at them and reminded:

"We ain't worried about no law officer. You talk foolish, Bill, in trying to have your joke."

Hancey smiled genially and spoke up:

"Bill's partly right. We're looking for some one. That is, I am. Looking for an old acquaintance and I don't know if he's ahead or behind me. Don't know whether to hustle along, or take it slow and easy."

"I'm Buck Cape," informed the leader. "Slow and easy wins more often then hustle bustle. My name means more down in Texas than it does up here. Tell your friend to light and be neighborly. Stick around and see if your man don't show up."

Blase cantered up and dismounted, his red face beaming with cordiality. As he was dismounting Hancey told Cape:

"I used to ride with a man from Texas—Race Toms by name. Ever meet him?"

Cape jumped to his feet and cried:

"Race Toms? Why, I should say I did know Race. He was rubbed out on the Little Blue a little while ago. You with him then?"

The three men on the grass bent their gaze on him curiously. Hancey regretted mentioning Toms. He shook his head, answered:

"That's mighty bad news. When we parted near the Kansas-Nebraska line he was bound for the Montana gold fields. Rubbed out, eh? Indians, I suppose."

"No!" cried Bill. "A damned white killer. Crawled into Toms' friendship'n' murdered him."

"The scoundrel!" muttered Hancey.

Cape stared thoughtfully at Hancey, then shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

"Well, he's gone. Went with his boots on, like so many brave boys have done out here and in the mountains. Who's the man you're looking for?" The question was put abruptly.

Hancey was satisfied that Blackie was not in the house, else a bullet would have announced his presence there. He promptly replied:

"He calls himself Blackie. He was a friend of Race Toms."

Cape opened his mouth as if to speak, then clamped his lips together. Bill lazily remarked—

"We ain't honing to nose into your business, Mr. Peters."

"Certainly not," hastily assured Cape. "I knew Toms in the old days. Never heard of t'other feller."

One of the men who had been lying on his back with his hands clasped under his head, swung up to a sitting posture and pushed back his hat and stared at Cape. The latter glanced at Blase, then back at Hancey, and with a smile cordially invited:

"Any friend of Toms is more'n welcome. You will have the place all to yourselves after a day or so. I've been so excited at finding a friend of Toms that I forgot to be perlite to your friend. We're more'n glad to have you with us, Mr. Blase."

"Just plain Jim Blase, boys," heartily corrected the Missourian. "Never can git used to being 'mistered.' Could you rassle a drink without shortening yourselves?"

"I'm as dumb as a knot on a log," declared Cape. "Drink is what we have plenty of, my friend. S'pose we all take a holiday and have a little fun. The boys are gitting rusty."

As he finished the invitation, he jerked his head toward the house and nodded to Bill.

"Can't have any too much fun to suit me," assured Blase, rubbing his big red hands together and smacking his lips in anticipation.

Bill trotted out with a jug and presented it to Blase. While the wagon master was drinking with much gusto Cape eyed Hancey shrewdly and with a low chuckle observed—

"If I was going to bet, I'd bet you like a game of cards."

"And you'd win, hands down," promptly admitted Hancey, "for I do enjoy a friendly game."

"Why, then! We can have a peach of a time!" cried Cape. "Poker is my best hold. S'pose we go inside out of the sun."

Hancey read a warning in the wagon master's eye and ignored it.

"Inside by all means," he readily agreed.

That Blase was displeased was further evidenced by the slight frown wrinkling the tanned brow for a second. It was only a spasmodic contraction of the muscles as if he had blinked his eyes at the sun, or had slightly grimaced at the raw taste of the liquor. He was prompt, however, to walk to the house with Cape. Next came Hancey with Bill. Hancey told his companion—

"If you gave your last name I didn't catch it."

"My last name is a mighty hard one to remember," he grinned vacuously.

"Did you ride with Quantrel?"

"With a higher card than him—Shelby. Did you know, stranger, there's something in the air up here that acts as p'izen on a man who asks too many questions?"

Hancey laughed lightly and replied—

"It would be sad if I were poisoned without learning more."

"I can't tell if you're for the North or South," grumbled Bill.

"I'm for myself and the West."

Cape and Blase passed through the low doorway and the latter halted and blocked the entrance until his eyes could penetrate the reduced light. He saw two men stretched out on buffalo robes across the room. An architectural oddity was the ceiling of cottonwood boards reaching from the north end halfway across the room. Apparently it had been started to furnish a loft and left half completed. But what caught Blase's quick gaze was the fact that there was no opening to the loft. The triangular space was tightly boxed up.

HANCEY crossed the threshold and experienced a strong premonition of danger. His bearing was jocular, however, and he laughed loudly at some remark of Bill's. And while he laughed he hooked his thumbs in his belt and swept the dim interior with his searching gaze, long trained to see quickly and clearly in the smoky light of gambling halls. He attached no significance to the abbreviated and useless loft, but was interested in the two men reclining on the buffalo robes, for he knew they had stood at the glassless windows with cocked guns a few minutes before.

These two now simulated an awakening from deep sleep and rolled from their couches and yawned and stretched their arms and blinked stupidly at the company. Cape introduced the slim young man, scarcely out of his 'teens, as the Kid, and the heavy man with long red hair as Red Dave. He explained to the two that the strangers were to remain and enjoy the hospitality of the ranch while waiting for a friend to show up, and that a game of cards was to help speed the time of waiting.

Turning to Hancey, as if to refresh his recollection, Cape raised his voice and asked—

"You said your friend was called Blackie, didn't you?"

Hancey nodded. Blase nudged him and glanced toward the Kid, and of the latter inquired—

"Ain't you the Kid I heard mentioned down Injun Territory way?"

"Most likely," softly replied the Kid, showing perfect white teeth in a quiet smile.

Blase's query helped Hancey to place him at once—a diabolic young murderer, who killed for the love of killing, a throwback to some monstrous ancestor. His history had been told in the mining camps within three months, but Hancey scarcely found him to be a girl faced boy, innocent of eye and fair of complexion, as gossip had described him.

His face lacked color and showed but little effect of outdoor life. His eyes appeared long and narrow and were sinister through the half closed lids. His mouth was twisted to one side and he barely moved his lips in speaking. He wore two guns in his belt. Gazing sleepily into Hancey's smiling face he drew his thumb over the notched butt of one gun to advertise his record as a killer.

"Oh, I've heard all about your skill and courage," assured Hancey.

"Where?" eagerly demanded the Kid, his eyes opening wide for an instant.

"Denver, California Gulch, and other places."

This pleased the Kid's vanity; the corner of his mouth drew down and he swaggered his slim shoulders and thrust out his chin and boasted—

"Reckon most folks in the mountains have heard of me."

"Every one west of the Missouri and a lot east of it have heard about you, Kid," harshly spoke up Cape. "Now we want to see how good you can play poker."

"If he can play as well as he can handle a gun, he always quits a winner," remarked Blase admiringly.

The Kid ignored the frowning gaze of Cape and informed—

"No one I ever got after got away from me yet." His thumb again caressed the notches on his right hand gun. "And I don't take no back seat when it comes to cards."

"We know it, Kid. We all know that," hurriedly agreed Cape. "Now how shall we play? Dave, spread a blanket."

Blase advised:

"Let's cut to see what three men drop out, leaving five to play. Eight makes it mighty unhandy, with some one always drawing from the discard."

"I don't cut. I play," murmured the Kid, and he dropped cross legged on the earthern floor at one side of the blanket and stared insolently up into Blase's red face.

"We can't cut our visitors out," reminded Cape.

"Who asked you to. Cut yourself out," replied the Kid.

Blase gave a loud laugh and slapped a big hand on his thigh and cried:

"You young hellion, I like you. I'd love to see your gunplay if I wasn't the target."

The Kid eyed him with slant eyed suspicion for a moment, then decided he had no excuse for taking offense and admitted—

"My gunplay is good." With a jerk of his head he leered up at Hancey and crisply demanded, "What you looking so down in the mouth about, gambler?"

Hancey brightened his expression and answered:

"Didn't know I was looking sober. Maybe I'm disappointed because my friend didn't wait for me in Julesburg as he promised. Don't even know he's reached Julesburg. Man said some one answering his description came up this way, probably bound for the Latham crossing."

"You're pernickity in your talk. Must 'a' gone to school sometime," said the Kid.

Hancey refused to be goaded into a quarrel and continued smiling but made no reply. Cape was quick to say:

"See here, Kid, you behave. You know you don't want to ride alone. And if you ride with me, you behave. Every one knows you're mighty good with a gun, but don't try to show off *now*."

The Kid stared at him sullenly, then decided it was wise to subside a bit.

"Cut the cards and let's start the game," he truculently urged. "Too much talky-talk."

The sleepy gaze he directed at Hancey was that of the born killer impatient to be about business. Vanity was back of his hostility. He was vain of his prowess as a killer. He was vain of his tawdy finery in the shape of several rings and a big silver scarf pin in the shape of a revolver; but he sensed a vast difference in his personal appearance and that of the gambler's. The latter's polished boots, well fitting, though travel stained, clothes, and light felt hat, were almost a revelation to one who had passed his life in Indian Territory. Being vain he was jealous; and being jealous he knew of but one way to ease his state of mind.

Cape wouldn't chance the elimination of his guests from the game and, without cutting the deck, he quickly arranged it so that he and Bill should sit in with the Kid and the visitors. Hancey offered to be an onlooker, but the Kid was vociferous in insisting that the gambler play. Nor would Cape and his friends listen to the proposal.

THE KID sat at one end of the blanket with his back to the open door. Blase was quick to sit on his left, and Hancey got the most out of the situation by taking his place on the Kid's right and opposite to the wagon master. Cape dropped on Hancey's right. This left Bill between Cape and Blase. Red Dave posted himself behind Blase and scowled slightly upon discovering that Hancey was darting occasional glances at him. The other two men stood behind Cape and Hancey, under the gaze of the wagon master.

Hancey produced a double handful of gold coins, and the Kid sucked in his breath. He laughed softly, as if secretly amused, when Blase dropped a chinking bag of gold and silver coins before him.

Cape caught his eye and rebuked—

"Not over your drunk yet?"

The Kid eyed him evilly, but the older man's steady stare, reinforced by the scowling eyes of Red Dave, won. The young killer bowed his head and from the bosom of his shirt produced a roll of money.

Hancey glanced at it curiously, then leaned back and hooked his thumbs in his belt and remarked—

"If you want to play for fun, I'm willing; but I'm not playing gold against Confed money."

The Kid's eyes opened wide and closed almost shut. Before he could speak Cape was angrily rebuking:

"How many times have I got to tell you that you can't work off that stuff on us. Dig down. You've got hard money."

The Kid replaced the bills and from his pocket fished out a handful of coins and without lifting his gaze from the blanket arranged these in front of him. Cape suggested a dollar ante and ten dollar limit, explaining that he could not afford a stiffer game. The Kid sniffed derisively. Hancey cheerfully offered to make the ante two bits and the limit a dollar. Blase remarked that he was playing for recreation and didn't care how small they fixed the stakes. The Kid lifted his head and shrilly insisted that Cape's proposal was meager enough. The game began.

After the first hand, won by Bill, with Blase trying to bluff by repeated raises, there was none in the room who did not sense the tension of waiting. Something dramatic, something tragic, was impending; and only the visitors failed to guess when it would happen. Hancey refused to open on two pairs so that he might have more time to puzzle his mind. The position of the three onlookers had satisfied him at the start as to the source of trouble when it tumbled about him and his friend.

There was no mistaking the covetous gleam in the Kid's light gray eyes and no mistaking Cape's anger that his follower should so frankly betray his desires. In the brief time spent on the hand, Hancey was satisfied that there was something hidden, something subtle, and something which would take him and his companion completely by surprise unless discovered in time.

Again Blase tried to bluff and talked loud, but lost the pot to the Kid, who flapped his arms and crowed like a rooster. The wagon master gave an excellent personification of a man warmed to great good nature by drink and boisterously intent upon having a roaring time. Hancey was quick to note the lines in the brick red face, when for a moment his features relaxed, and while he ceased his extravagant threats of scaring every one out of the next pot. There was the quick, nervous, but almost imperceptible trick of darting a glance across the blanket.

On the next deal Hancey raised for cards. The Kid saw and raised back. Blase promptly saw the first raise, but now he was hesitating. Hancey stared at him, as if waiting to learn what he proposed to do. Blase met his gaze squarely, dropped his cards and admitted—

"I'm scared."

The Kid crowed with delight at this frank admission, and the others grinned. They failed to note what Hancey saw—a quick uplift of the eyes as Blase spoke.

Hancey saw the Kid's raise. He settled back a trifle while waiting for cards and glanced up. He was under the edge of the half loft and could see only the ridge pole of the south end of the house. As he picked up his cards, completely puzzled as to what message his friend was trying to convey, Blase again glanced upward and slightly frowned.

Hancey now believed that he understood. His friend was afraid of something concealed overhead. The depth of the boxed up place, from ceiling to ridgepole, was a scant three feet. On first entering the room he had failed to discover either a ladder or cleats on the wall.

Being out of the play, Blase announced a desire to drink and started to rise. Before he could get on his feet Red Dave set the jug beside him. Both he and Hancey caught the ripple of interest that ran about the room at this move of the wagon master to leave the blanket. Drinking from the jug, Blase mopped his red face and displayed much interest in the spirited betting between Hancey and the Kid. The latter screamed each raise in a shrill falsetto and pounded his hand on the blanket each time he deposited coins in the pot. In silence Hancey met each raise and tossed in coins in raising back. The Kid's money was down to the vanishing point and he wolfishly demanded of Cape—

"Lend me a handful."

Cape glanced sidewise at Hancey and hesitated.

Hancey turned his head and smiled pleasantly at the youth and advised:

"You'd better save what's left of your pile. I'm now holding fours."

"I'm holding something stronger'n fours!" screamed the Kid, one hand dropping to a gun.

"Damn them guns!" groaned Blase, jerking two .38's from his belt to the blanket. "They've rubbed the hide off my hips." With a hand on one gun, as if he had forgotten to remove it, he stared curiously at the Kid and asked, "Going to bet one of your irons?"

The Kid, on the point of drawing his weapon, stared dully at the hairy, red hand resting on the .38. Hancey had made no hostile move. The Kid slowly brought his hand forward and dropped his cards, and muttered—

"I drop."

Hancey spread out four tens and remarked:

"You can see I wasn't bluffing. No use for any one in this crowd to try to bluff. Then again, this is a friendly game. If it was a real game I'd be glad to see you wade in up to your chin."

Cape's interest was centered on the wagon master. As the cards were being shuffled he remarked—

"If the guns are in your way, toss 'em on the bunk."

"I will," replied Blase. Then he laughed ruefully and lifted the buckskin bag with his left hand and added, "A few more wild pots and there'll be plenty of room for my irons."

He glanced down at the nearly empty bag and frowned; then he was repeating the quick uplift of his eyes. Hancey inclined his head to show he understood. Cape's visage wore a somber expression. He had no interest in the next hand and dropped his cards after barely glancing at them. His attention was absorbed by the two .38's in front of the wagon master. He endeavored to exchange glances with Red Dave standing behind Blase, but Hancey stared at the man at the same time and Dave hung his head.

HANCEY now changed his play. His thin face hardened and his dark eyes half closed. He played as he played with professionals, darting his gaze rapidly from face to face, and yet he appeared to have much time for watching Red Dave. As he swung his head to stare steadily into the Kid's gray eyes he shuffled and dealt with amazing rapidity.

"Go slower," muttered the Kid. "I can't see where they're coming from."

Hancey paused long enough to ask—

"You know they're coming from the top, don't you?"

He was no longer amiable, and his dark eyes challenged the younger man. But the Kid was not ready for battle. There was the hairy, red hand of the wagon master close to a six-shooter.

"Oh, sure, they're coming from the top," agreed the Kid; and inwardly he cursed the advantage Blase held because his guns were already out of their holsters.

Nor did Hancey play a genial game any longer. He raised the limit, barking his bets, and never was his gaze at rest. The three men at the blanket felt they were always under his sharp surveillance, and Red Dave firmly believed that he was constantly being watched.

Blase knew the showdown must come soon, come the sooner because of Hancey's change of mood. Less quick than his friend, he passed up an excellent hand that he might be free to use his eyes. The Kid, his thin lipped mouth now twisted rigidly to one side, tried to keep up with the betting while watching for the moment when Blase should lift his hand from the blanket.

Hancey was intent upon forcing a climax by winning as fast as luck, skill in reading his adversaries and bluff would permit. Blase believed the break had come when the Kid edged back and gently announced—

"I'm hogged out."

Cape's eyes glistened with approval. Before the Kid could rise, Hancey had dropped a handful of coins before him and was saying:

"Count them. Friendly game. Luck may turn."

The Kid did not know how to meet this maneuver. Blase was watching him. He sullenly remained at the blanket, gritting his teeth and trying to restrain his terrible rage until the wagon master's hand was clear of the guns for a few seconds.

Hancey continued to win. Blase seemed to have lost his courage and continued to drop out after seeing a raise or two. He knew his friend was trying to keep the three men around the blanket until all could quit playing at the same time.

From his position Blase could glance up and study the end of the ceiling over his friend's head. The boxed up end was formed from boards taken from packing boxes. These were fitted tightly together. From the moment he first saw the half ceiling he had been striving to guess its purpose. There was no indication of a trapdoor in the ceiling, nor of any place of ingress in the end. It's shallow capacity rendered it useless as a place of storage, while lack of ingress and ladder discouraged the idea of a hiding place. And yet it was there, and men had gone to the trouble of making it.

"No way of gitting into it. No ladder to reach it," he told himself as he discarded and kept his hand by a gun while waiting to draw to a flush.

He turned up the corner of the card and promptly threw the hand into the discard and further mused—

"If anybody got into that cubby hole he'd have to go through the roof."

His nerves gave a jump at this thought. He had noticed nothing unusual about the roof when outside; but he had seen only half of it. He burned with a desire to go to the back of the house and investigate. Reason told him there was no sense in a man's climbing a roof and getting into the narrow space between the flooring and roof. Intuition kept tugging at him to watch the abbreviated loft, although it was sealed against entrance from the inside of the ranch-house.

Cape broke in on his musings by observing:

"You two fellers luckier'n hell! Your big hands never fight each other."

This remark could be innocently interpreted, but neither of the visitors considered it to be so intended. However, Blase lightly replied:

"I've learned to watch out when my friend goes after a pot. If I feel lucky I play my hand hard, no matter if it's only small threes, even two pair. But when he gits to raring about so much, I know he's thinking a hand worth calling on is worth raising on."

"He's lucky!" hoarsely muttered Bill.

"Too lucky!" whined the Kid through his twisted lips.

Cape glared at him a warning not to be too forward and to let others develop the situation. Both Hancey and Blase knew they were rushing toward a tragic denouement, but as yet neither could make any sense out of the business.

Why did the men dally, if robbery were the motive? Blase's mind continued to dwell on something sinister above the low ceiling just over the heads of Cape and Hancey.

The latter had arrived at the conclusion that Blackie had been at the ranch and was due to return at any minute and that Cape and his men wished to keep him engaged with the game until the breed could steal up and surprise him. He dropped out of one play and, while Cape and Bill with poorly simulated zeal were raising back and forth, took time to observe his position in regard to the open door and the windows.

It was while glancing at the door over the Kid's head that he idly observed a dark slouch hat hanging beside the door. He shifted his glance to Red Dave and his dilapidated head covering. He was recalling that the men outside the house were wearing hats when he and Blase rode up, and that the two on the buffalo robes had put on their hats when he entered the room. The hat by the door began to suggest possibilities.

To make sure that both men standing back of him and Cape were wearing hats he tilted back his head. A bit of dirt fell on his nose.

His gambler's nerve restrained him from betraying the terrific jolt this tiny happening gave him. Bill and Cape were still betting and indulging in much loud talk. A sidelong glance revealed the Kid's half closed eyes fixed on Blase's big hands as they rested close to the big guns. Red Dave was staring at the top of Blase's hat.

Catching Blase's eye the gambler lightly remarked—

"Fighting corral."

"Just what do you mean by that?" fiercely demanded the Kid.

Hancey smiled into the vicious face and answered:

"The way we are sitting, young fellow. Heads to the center. What else did you imagine I could mean?"

THE KID dropped his gaze. Without moving his hand Hancey pointed his forefinger upward for an instant. Then he brushed his nose. Blase's eyes grew lurid; and with an upward glance and a widening of his eyes he asked a question. Hancey answered yes by inclining his head. As he did so a bit of dirt fell on his bare neck. With a warning glance at the wagon master Hancey shifted his position slightly. As Bill swept in the pot Hancey abruptly announced—

"I'm through."

"Not by a damned sight!" said the Kid in a low voice, exchanging a glance with Blase. "You come here. You say you want a game. Your partner 'lows he wants a high old time. I'll quit when I owe you nothing."

"You'll owe me nothing when you quit," assured Hancey as he hooked his thumbs into his belt. "But I don't enjoy playing cards with so much dirt falling down my neck from that trifling ceiling overhead."

As he spoke he threw back his head and for the first time took a square look at the ceiling. His gaze examined it only for a moment, but he saw much. The point of a knife was being withdrawn from between two of the cottonwood boards and a tiny shaving was floating down to his upturned face.

For a moment each of the eight men in the room below the loft remained motionless. The Kid broke the tension by screaming like a wildcat, and he and Cape went for their guns at the same time. Without lifting the butt of his weapon from the blanket the wagon master shot the Kid through the head and instantly pivoted the gun around to cover the two men behind Hancey.

The report of his gun was blended with that of Hancey's, and Cape's lead went through the blanket and into the earthen floor as Hancey's bullet caught him in the left side. The two shots and the covering of Bill and the three men who were standing all happened as quickly as a man can snap his fingers twice. Red Dave had been so taken by surprise that he had forgotten even to start for his gun. Time had been consumed in bringing the situation to a gruesome end; only a second had been needed to end it.

Like two grotesque wooden dolls the dead men slumped forward over their crossed legs in a deep salaam to death. Bill, his mouth gaping widely, for a moment remained as motionless as the dead, his outspread fingers halted halfway to a holster. The three men on their feet likewise appeared to be stunned. For a count of five the picture held; both Blase and Hancey were motionless as they held the four Southerners covered. Then the picture was broken by Hancey rolling backward between the two men behind him. A bullet from the ceiling crashed into the spot where he had been sitting.

He came to his feet and cried:

"You three stick up your hands! Face that wall!"

As Bill started to climb to his feet Blase dropped one gun long enough to reach forward and snatch the revolver from his belt. Then he scrambled to his feet and emptied a gun through the boxed up end of the little loft.

Hancey started for the door, but wheeled and covered the four men now standing in line, their hands up and their backs to him, and shouted:

"Take their guns, Blase! Blackie's up under the roof! Watch these men!"

Three of the four were armed. Red Dave made a move as if about to lower an arm.

"You heard the Rattler, you skunk!" roared Blase. "S'pose I must kill you, Red Dave."

"The Rattler!" cried Red Dave. "I don't want anything out of his dish. We're through."

Although intent to be about his business, Hancey was held in his tracks, staring at a drop of crimson on the edge of the gray blanket. Another drop, and the spell was broken and Hancey was through the doorway. The wagon master quickly disarmed his prisoners and herded them under the ceiling. Bill glared at a drop of blood on the back of his hand. Blood was slowly dripping through a crack between the boards.

Blase laughed harshly and derided:

"And you'd let that scum git you into a fix! You really thought you'd fool us!"

"We never 'lowed that feller was the Rattler," hoarsely insisted Red Dave.

"The Kid's dead!" chattered another. "Cape dead! Gang all shot to hell!"

In the meanwhile Hancey, after running in a wide circle to keep watch of the roof, had gained the rear of the ranch-house. A short ladder was leaning against the low eaves. A square section of the roof, cunningly covered with dry sods, was slowly rising. Through the opening came the head and shoulders of Blackie. The breed was moving very slowly.

Blackie saw his waiting nemesis, but continued climbing through the opening. He appeared to be moving with great difficulty as if held down by weights. The front of his woolen shirt was soaked with blood and there was a bloody froth on his lips. He seated himself on the sods and began edging down the roof and then drew his guns. The last move was quickly made. The incline was not steep enough for him to make a swift descent by sliding; nor did he appear to be in a hurry. Hancey stared at him, held spellbound by the terrible spectacle.

The breed suddenly commenced singing a death song, as was becoming a Cheyenne man. As he sang and worked down toward the end of the ladder showing above the eaves he opened fire on Hancey. His mother's blood had claimed him and his raucous voice was still chanting his death song when Hancey began acting the part of the avenger.

The first shot struck the breed in the chest. He sagged backward and ceased his downward movement. Flattened out on the roof and without lifting his hands from the sods he fired two shots almost together. Hancey spun about as if hit a heavy blow. He knew he was wounded and he hated the breed for taking that satisfaction with him. Steadying himself, he emptied his two guns at the spread eagle figure and then slowly collapsed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUN CHASERS

WHILE Colonel J. M. Chivington was reporting to General S. R. Curtis at Fort Leavenworth, the gruesome result of his attack on the Cheyenne village on Sand creek, George Hancey was fighting for his life at Fort Kearny. The breed's bullet had passed through his chest. Blase watched over him at the Julesburg crossing until he dared take him to Kearny. The Indians continued their fight to save their hunting grounds, in other words to preserve their ancient habits of living. White men east of the Mississippi were savagely contending to divide, to preserve, the Union.

To those in the East the news that the Cheyennes alone, in the Sand Creek massacre, among their chiefs lost White Antelope, Standing Water, War Bonnet, One Eye, Spotted Crow, Two Thighs, Bear Man, Yellow Shield and Yellow Wolf meant but little. The Western border rejoiced, although Chivington's reported loss of but nine men killed eloquently testified to the one sidedness of the affair. The doings of the hostiles were of more importance to many a ranch and frontier post than the maneuverings of Grant's and Lee's armies.

But George Hancey was indifferent to the tides of war as he made his lonely fight at Kearny. The beginning of 1865, while the hostiles were attacking Julesburg, found him still at Kearny and still fighting. The post surgeon marveled that he lived on through the winter months. But he lived and in the spring made rapid strides. He was weak and unfit to travel, but he insisted on riding to the Little Blue. What with preparations for the Powder River expedition and the usual strenuous efforts of the garrison to guard the long road, too much time could not be devoted to a civilian, and the invalid was allowed to depart.

He rode down the valley of the Little Blue with no recollection of the last twenty miles. As one in a dream he saw his horse Faro grazing; and Sam Strong and his father were lifting him from the saddle and carrying him into a house. Ruth, walking by his side and carrying his hat, was unreal. The grave face of Nancy looked down on him for a bit.

Unconscious of the lapse of time he opened his eyes one afternoon to find Ruth sitting beside him.

"You're back home," she whispered.

Back home. The two words made him feel wonderfully at ease, and he slept again. Gradually the unreal became real until he was convalescent enough to ask questions and to hear the news. Bird of Freedom had gone up the valley with the Brackets and must have passed him, unknowingly, while he was bedridden at Kearny. None knew where the three had located, as no word had come through. Nancy was married to Sam Strong and the two were living at the Freedom ranch, and Sam promised to do well with cattle, once the hostiles were conquered by the Government.

When Hancey was able to walk outdoors he loved to lie on the river bank with Faro grazing near, and listen to Ruth as she read the news from the East. Hancey had kept informed on the high spots of the war up to the time Blackie fired his farewell shot. Now there were six months of epochal history to catch up with.

The Thirteenth Amendment, the futile Hampton Roads Peace Conference, the dramatic restoration of the Stars and Stripes over Fort Sumter, Sherman's march north from Savannah, Sheridan's devastating progress through central Virginia, were all rehearsed to him in the order of their happening.

It was apparent that the days of the Confederacy were about run out. Lincoln's second inaugural address made a deeper impression on him, a fighting man, than had all the successes at arms. For years he had been concerned about his private vengeance and daily problems filled with danger. He wondered why the girl had waited. For four years there had been a man's part for him to play and he had been swayed by self, a lust to satiate his hatred of one man, a breed.

He would always rejoice that Blackie had died as he did; but he always would regret that it was Blase's bullet that first found the murderer. And yet, as he listened to Ruth's soft voice reading the news, he knew he had wasted his time. He fought in vain against the weakness of tears as she read portions of the President's address.

> "Let us judge not, that we be not judged. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid with another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so it still must be said; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether . . . With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in."

Hancey lay with his face on his arms, overcome by emotion. Finally he lifted his head and announced:

"Ruth, I must get well fast. I must get into the Army. Our wedding must wait till I return. I have kept you waiting so long it would be wrong to tie you down now to a wreck and a shirker."

"I have waited quite a bit," she gently agreed. "But since you came home I knew you would go, if able. And you'll go as my husband."

"You're sacrificing your freedom."

"I will be sending a man to war," she fiercely interrupted. "Now get well."

Filled by belated ardor to do his work, and spurred on by a newly discovered sense of duty, Hancey made miraculous improvement. It was as if his mind were mending his body, as if a high and purer spirit were overriding physical laws. He worried and feared he would be too late when the valley heard of Five Forks and the last assault on Petersburg. As a result of this worry he had a relapse. The wedding was to take place the day he left to enlist. He rallied quickly and they were married on the day the telegram told of the fall of Richmond.

He was riding Faro to Beatrice when the wires flashed across the continent the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox. The day he dejectedly re-entered the valley of the Little Blue the bells were tolling for the death of a great president and one of the greatest men who had ever lived.

IT WAS late September when the Hanceys, with two wagons of goods, reached the Julesburg crossing under cover of a mounted patrol. It was Hancey's idea to return to where he had been known as the Rattler and prove that he could be George Hancey, merchant. Ruth had approved, for she knew he never would be contented on a ranch. They were in haste to make Denver before the first snow swept the foothills; and they looked ahead to meeting the Brackets and Bird of Freedom. The latter had written how the Brackets were happily situated on a ranch near Denver, and had assured him that the Indian trouble had been shifted to the hunting grounds of the Northern Cheyennes, and that Colorado was freed from danger.

A postscript, which had caused Nancy Freedom Strong's eyes to dance, had warned—

> "Be sure and save any Confederate money you git hold of."

The letter also announced that those who found capital could make fortunes, as there were mines just aching to be bought for a song and sold dear to Easterners.

In bidding them good by and confiding an affectionate message to her uncle Nancy had reminded—

"Remember, we love him dearly and do not trust him a small bit."

However, there were those from the mountains in great haste to reach the Big Muddy before winter blocked the roads. On the day the Hanceys crossed the South Fork they met two wagons coming down the Denver road, driven by the Brackets and Bird of Freedom.

After the surprise was over and the enthusiastic greetings were ended, Freedom combed his long white beard thoughtfully and advised the young couple:

"Better turn back with us. Colorado's all hogged out. Brackets here will tell you the same."

Florida Bracket's face took on a glum expression. He contented himself with simply explaining—

"Betsy opined we needed a change."

Mrs. Bracket's beautiful brown eyes were turned on him in reproach and she sighed:

"Now, Florida, that sounds almost snaky. You said yourself the ranch was lonely. At least, we found it far different than Drakeville. If I could have heard the whippoorwills singing their lonesome tune at night, or the chirrup of robins, or even the drumming of a pheasant . . . My heart just ached every time I thought of the sweet content we give up to come out here where the hoppers eat what the fires don't burn, and the Injuns run off what cattle that don't take the sore tongue disease."

"And so you've decided to go back to the Little Blue," Ruth broke in.

"God knows!" sighed Florida. "I'm still grateful we're living between two oceans. We can't chase the sun after we hit the Pacific."

"And you young folks better turn back with us," quickly added Freedom. "The railroad's bound to come through mighty quick, now the war's ended. There'll be rare picking in land deals for us who know how."

Hancey shook his head and explained:

"That's the trouble. I don't know how. All I know is cards and guns. Now I'm going to learn how to be a merchant. I've closed a door behind me. I shall never open it. We'll chase the sun up into Colorado."

Mrs. Bracket now demanded attention, and announced:

"I've thought it all out. It come to me in a flash. You two children go with us and we'll go up the North Fork and take a look at Oregon. If we like it up there we'll send for the Strongs to join us. And there we'll live like one big happy family. Many times I've thought I was started for that wonderful country, but Florida has always put his foot down."

Mr. Bracket made choking noises in his throat. Hancey smiled and insisted:

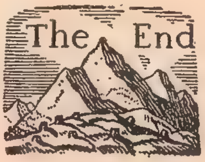
"We'll keep after the sun up the Denver road. Too many Indians between here and Oregon. Besides, we've made all our plans. Give our dear love to the folks on the Little Blue."

"We will, if we go down the valley, which we may, if we decide to try Swinging Limb, down in Alabama," promptly promised Mrs. Bracket.

Her husband drew in a deep breath, and exploded:

"By gawdfrey, Betsy! If you go anywhere except back to the Little Blue, you'll go alone, or go with another man! I still love you, Betsy, and I've been years in putting my foot down. But it's down at last and all hell can't jar it loose!"

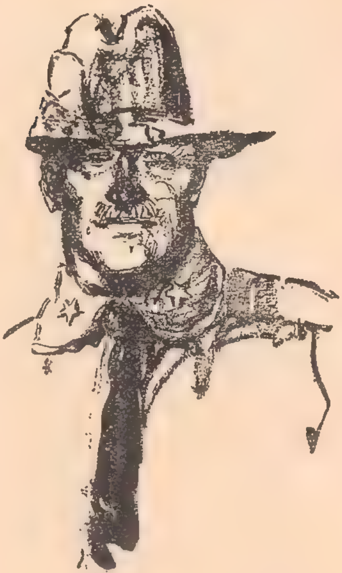
And so they parted—youth to follow the sun into the mountains to start a new home and to contribute sterling citizens to the new commonwealth; and age to return to the quiet of the Little Blue, where old friends waited.



Chicken Bill

whose peculiar appetite won him fame as a fighter

By ROBERT V. CARR



ABOUT all Bill Brown got from his pa was his last name. Bill's old man was sure an empty shell. One time, when we was about three months the slaves of Uncle Sam, Bill thought his old man had sent him a five dollar note, but it turned out to be a ticket on a raffle for an eight day clock. Bill had no room in his pack for a clock, so he sends the raffle ticket back to his old man, with a chunk of hardtack for the old boy to use in place of his heart.

"Elmer," my upstandin' sidekick tells me one hot afternoon when the colonel is restin' us so he can rest himself, "I owe a great deal to my old pa. I reckon I'm the man I am because of my ambition not to be like him. My old man is a model to me—a model I aim to spend my life in not copyin'. As I stand here, with this ton of junk on my back and that pile of taller there on that horse, wonderin' when he'll get his next shot of booze, I regard myself as a self-made man. For seven generations the Browns hid under the kitchen table whenever the drums began to rattle. You see here, you lousy rookie, the one hero of the Brown family."

"Well," says I, "I heard once that hero had two meanin's—one, a fool; the other, a damn, fool."

Bill tried to get his face away from his blanket roll, which had worn it raw.

"Maybe that's right," says he, "but if it weren't for the fools, there'd be no fun in this world. Gawd, what wouldn't I give for a mess of fried chicken with fixin's right now!"

That was the way with Bill. You couldn't talk with him very long before he'd swing in with something about chicken. That boy was sure a chicken maniac.

Comin' across the country to Frisco, Bill, bein' a good-lookin' boy, was kissed mighty nigh to death by no end of girls. He had a haversack full of hair, all shades from dead black to light yeller, the girls had snipped off their heads for him. Every station Bill was out collectin' kisses, but he never forgot to inquire about the chicken situation. Once a girl came down with a pot of chicken and dumplin's. Bill got the whole works. He took down the girl's name after he'd sampled her chicken. Told her he'd look her up and marry her when he got back.

"Stay right here, sweetheart," he tells her. "Don't budge nor make a move till I end this war. Any little baby mine who can fix chicken this way is due to become Missis Bill Brown. I aim to wipe out the whole Spanish nation. When that job is done I'm comin' back to you on the run."

I lost count before we got halfway to Frisco, but every girl who showed up with chicken became engaged to be married to Bill.

"Elmer," says he, "why should I begrudge a little favor to a girl who knows how to fix chicken?"

At a little station up in the mountains one girl brings Bill a chicken pie. I never saw a boy take on so. He kissed her with tears in his eyes.

"To think," says he, "I've lived all these years and never knew you was on earth! If ever I get out of this man's army I'm comin' back to you so fast I'll set the grass afire. My name's Bill Brown—Bill Brown of the volunteers. I come of a well known family. Don't look at another man till I get back. Stay right here and wait for me. I'll marry you if it's the last move I make on earth."

In Frisco the wimmin went strong on chicken sandwiches. Bill was sure happy. He was around huggin' and kissin' the old wimmin, and they just showered him with chicken. When we got out on Market Street and were slippin' and slidin' in flowers, Bill was inquirin' for chicken all along the line.

By and by we work out of the crowd, and it was sure a job, what with the Frisco girls hangin' on to us and the Civil War vets tryin' to carry our guns and all the hurrah of a crowd that can't do enough for volunteer soldiers. Prairie and mountain boys we were, every one picked out of a dozen men offered. No dodgin' for us, no lyin' down in the packs and cryin', "Mama, Mama, I won't go!" What we was scared of was that we wouldn't pass the surgeons. An American volunteer outfit, clean strain, rippin' and rarin' to go.

Our colonel was a lieutenant lifted from the regulars. When we reached the sand lot that we were to call home, sweet home, there wasn't a stick of lumber in sight. Not a latrine nor a cook shack, nor anything that looked like rations. There was a hydrant, but that was all. A thousand men on the edge of a busy street, and no latrines and nothin' in sight to eat.

"I tell you how it is with this imitation colonel they've wished on to us," says Bill after he's sized up the situation, "he's so busy tryin' to convince himself he's a colonel instead of the lousy drill sergeant he is that there's no room in his head for common sense. He has too much education for his intelligence. Any boss of a threshin' crew would have sent a gang ahead to fix up the camp, but this noise-on-a-hoss we've drawed looks on us as something to fatten his conceit on."

About then some trucks rolled in. Everybody brightened up, thinkin' they were bringin' in rations. But it was a false alarm. They were loaded with tents and stuff for the officers. Next thing details were busy gettin' the officers bedded down. The colonel had a whole company fixin' up his headquarters. All this while there were no latrines, no tents, no grub and no nothin' in sight for enlisted men.

"Tell you what," says Bill. "I don't aim to go to bed on an empty stomach. This here colonel has got himself fixed cozy for the night and our little captain has his bed and nightie ready, but the regiment and the company has their tails out to the breeze and their bellies empty. But Bill Brown ain't goin' to suffer. Look up yonder on that side hill, Elmer, and tell me what you see."

"A chicken coop," says I, "if I'm not blind with starvation."

"Correct, my boy. When it's dark, me and you go up and grab a couple of fat hens. I thought them wimmin at the wharf had filled me full, but now I'm empty as baby's cradle. God helps them who helps themselves in this outfit, and it's no sin to steal to keep from starvin'."

Guard lines were throwed out, but me and Bill paid no attention to such little things. As soon as it got dark we was crawlin' up toward the hen house. Bill reaches in and grabs a couple. About that time the owner of the chickens come to the back door and opened with a shotgun. He was too far away to do much damage, but Bill got a birdshot where he couldn't see it; just under the hide and stingin' like sin. But he hung on to the hens as we loped down the hill. Later on I nicked the birdshot out of Bill.

"The first man wounded in the war," says he. "I reckon I'll be drawin' a pension for this some day."

"Well," says I, "if I was shot where you be I'd sure keep quiet about it. You sure didn't get it facin' the enemy."

"Elmer," says he, "I reckon I ain't the first soldier who was shot while runnin' from the enemy. Danged if a shot in the rear don't speed a man up. I never knowed I had such good action. But we got them hens anyway. Now to sneak somewhere and cook 'em."

We was up half the night cookin' them hens. Had to fry 'em on our mess kits. Yet Bill claimed it was good eatin'. He was sure chicken crazy.

AFTER that we squatted on our sand lot and our officers took us out and proved to us they didn't know any more than we did, and then turned us over to the sergeants who proved the same. And that was the way of it for a long stretch. Bill was rustlin' chicken here and there, and we learned about steam beer and had girls strung out all over town. We got some new uniforms and went out in the rain with them and they faded, and we looked like a herd of zebras.

The colonel dogged and bullyragged us and told us how good he was and what he intended to make of us. The doctors talked to us and told us about the pitfalls of a great city and what not to do. The chaplain had us drove to his tent, and we had to listen to his talk, when we would rather have been down town liftin' steam beer or callin' on our lady friends. And society wimmin come out and threw oranges at us, and the fogs come in and chilled us. And sometimes we had grub and sometimes we didn't. And every time some big gazabel came to town, we marched miles to present arms to him.

Whenever he took a notion, and that was frequent, the colonel heaved his corporation on a horse and loaded us up with everything he could think of and drove us over the hills in heavy marchin' order hikes. His great ambition seemed to be to want to kill us before the enemy got a chance. His idea of a volunteer soldier and a pack mule was about the same. He never seemed to realize that green men, even if they were raised more or less rough, should be gradually hardened or they'll break.

A fool on a horse sure puts a lot of ex-soldiers on the pension roll. Our colonel cost the country a heap of money before we got shut of him.

In those days Chicken Bill used to take shells out of his belt and do the soldier growl.

"This one," he would say, holdin' out a forty-five seventy, "is for the colonel, the dog-minded, liver-busted, stone-headed and stone-hearted hot-ham son-of-a-you-know-what! Whang! Whang! Whang! Whang! Whang! A lot of useless junk out of the way and us honest men enjoyin' life. But hold on, I plumb forgot the Secretary of the Interior who is supposed to furnish the grub. One shell for him, and a few extras for the jigadier brindle. And our little beetle-headed cap. Two or three for him. And the chaplain, takin' up our good time with his jaw music, forcin' us to listen to his noise, with girls and beer waitin' down town! Give him what's left in the belt and then throw the old Springfield at him. Down with all officers, I say. Wipe 'em all out and nobody'd miss 'em except their pets."

Some home guard, with his feet so cold he has to keep 'em on the kitchen stove in July, while us soldiers are standin' up to our bellies in water and eatin' canned bull that bellers at you every time you open it, and smells like the records of them politicians who fed us on it, some home guard, I say, might think Chicken Bill's talk was a terrible thing. But here's the way of it; If you have laid your guts on the altar of your country, as the feller says, you can misname anybody from the President down. But if you've hid under the kitchen table when the drums begun to rattle, it's your job to keep the trap shut.

But Bill never gets so sore against the officers that he forgets about chicken. On dress parade, with the colonel blattin', "Fix bayonets," Bill would slap on his sticker with the thought of how he would like to pick a fat pullet with it. "Roast young chicken!" thinks Bill, with the water runnin' out of his mouth and down his jacket. Passin' in review, with the sergeants yellin', "Guide right!" Bill would be thinkin' of fried chicken with gravy. I could see his chops a-drippin' as we slapped 'em down to the port. On guard, outpost, inspection or whatever it might be, Bill was always dreamin' of chicken. And the moment he got loose, he was on the lookout for a chance to snatch some sleepy hen.

If there was a chicken within a hundred miles of the outfit, Bill brung it to his company and each man got a whack at it. Nothin' stingy or sneaky about friend Bill. We had them stingy ones and sneaks and liars in the company, but Bill was none of them things. If he stole a chicken every man in the outfit got a bite except the top sergeant and the company clerk. Bill had no use for top sergeants and less for clerks.

"There is something naturally wrong with a man who wants to be a top sergeant," claims Bill. "He ain't really a man, a top sergeant ain't. He's the captain's woman is what a top sergeant is. Take the one we got. What right has he got to live? Take the lowest kind of a lizard, go way back before its family got a start, and what you find will be a top sergeant. I say this top of ourn is low, but there ain't no words made to tell how low he is. He's lower than the thing that is lower than the lowest thing made, and cripes knows that don't start to tell how low I think he is. And his clerk! Wow! He's so low that a snake's belly is a mile above his head."

"Bill," I says, "you and me think alike. You have sure stated some scientific facts."

"That bein' the case," says he, "all talk is at an end. What say we have some nice fresh chicken for supper? I only got the hind leg of that chicken I stole from the colonel's table last night. There's a hen roost about a mile from here. What say we go up and relieve them hens of all doubts this evenin'? I've cleaned up everything close by."

"I'm game," says I. And that was the way it went.

ON THE ship Bill was sure a godsend. 'Peared he could smell grub through eight inches of cold steel. He hadn't been two hours on the transport before he had everything that resembled food spotted.

"Elmer," says he, "there's no live hens on board but there's good choice canned chicken. The hold of this ship is jammed with stuff sent us from lodges, churches and lawn parties. It's marked 'for enlisted men only.' But if we set and wait for any of that stuff, we'll both get so old we'll turn to a grindstone. So, with your help, I aim to pry into that hold and grab."

Bill was right about them canned jellies and jams and all the truck the people over the country sent us. The hold of the ship was full of it, but we never saw any of it except what we stole. What the government gave us was slum, rotten beef mixed with dough and stirred up in a vat.

You could smell it comin'. If a dog was starvin' and wasn't seasick, he might eat it but he would be ashamed of himself the rest of his life. An Injun might have swallowed some of it, but he would have gone out some place right afterwards and ate a dead buzzard to take the taste out of his mouth. We wouldn't have kicked, but for the hold bein' full of good grub that the people had sent us, and our officers eatin' first-class stuff.

Now and then some shoulder-strap would come down among us, and we'd hand him a plate of slum and ask him to dip his bill in it. He'd dip in and pretend it tasted all right, but he'd carry it in his face and head for his stateroom.

Of course we had good officers, men who wanted to do the fair thing, but I guess they were helpless. But one thing we took good notice of in them long weeks on the water, and that was that no officer of our outfit or any other outfit ever come down among us and said, "Boys, if you've got to eat slum, I'm here to eat it with you." I would like to remember such an officer, but somehow we didn't have one.

So Chicken Bill was something worth havin'. Of course he had plenty of help, and I was always with him, but it was him that lined everything out and gave the company a bite of something good to eat once in a while.

ONCE he stole a redhot boiled ham from the mess of the ship's officers. He came on the jump, passin' it backwards and forwards to himself to keep it from burnin' to his liver. We licked it up in three seconds. Another time he come with a blanketful of officers' grub all messed together, but we ate it just the same and licked off the blanket.

Then he found a way to get at the stuff the people had sent us. We sure licked up the jams and jellies and the canned fruit. But Bill weren't really happy till he run into the canned chicken. That was a big night for him.

But our colonel tumbled to what was bein' done, and nailed up the hole Bill and me had made, and put on a double guard.

"Why couldn't that curse of creation be human once in a while?" complains Bill. "That grub belongs to us and he knows it, but he wants to show us that he's boss. He's sittin' up there eatin' hotel grub and begrudgin' us a taste of a pickle. I never did hear tell of such a dog's relation. Well, we got the canned chicken anyway."

At Honolulu, though the people of that town gave us a big feed, Bill, more to keep in practise than anything else, stole the chickens of a Kanacker king and got a native woman to fix 'em up. She rung in some *poi*, a kind of native grub, on us, but it reminded us of slum and we passed it up. With beer, we made out in good shape.

"Bill," says I, "I reckon when you die and go to heaven, or maybe, the other post office, you'll be lookin' around for chicken the first thing."

"I sure will," he comes back. "Once a chicken thief always a chicken thief. If a fat pullet is roostin' in Saint Pete's whiskers I aim to snatch it. Chicken and angels belong to the same family, Elmer, for both wear feathers." Then he laughs. "It would be a great joke on me if I reached into a hen roost in heaven some night and got a couple of angels instead of a pair of fat Plymouth Rocks."

"It sure would," I agreed.

Bill was a funny cuss in them days. Always had some ketch or drive. Kept me laughin' most of the time. That's the kind of a sidekick to have, one that makes you laugh.

When we got to Manila, Dewey had sunk the Spanish fleet with a couple of six-shooters, and the Spaniards had hung out one of the biggest flags of truce ever known in the world. When they got through makin' that white flag there weren't a sheet left in the place and the Spanish babies all had to go naked.

Then we settled down to look at skinny legged native wimmin chewin' betel nut, and scabby, runty brown men, and to wonder why we had come to save 'em from the Spaniards. Me and Bill figgered that savin' the Filipinos was like savin' a boil. Heat, lizards, monkeys, fever, dysentery, black beer, poker on pay day, and five miles of all kinds of wimmin to take the soldier's money and send him home to face that sticker in the pension law, "result of his own vicious habits." But what can you expect of a lot of young colts? Then salmon and rice and rice and salmon!

Some bright mind, settin' back of a desk, figgered out that white men in the tropics should eat like the natives. About that time, somebody with a good stand-in with the government unloaded on the army all the canned salmon in the world. So here it come, salmon and rice, rice and salmon, in an unendin' stream. We got so we hardly moved when the mess call blew. Why go and get it, when we knowed what it was? It was easier to go hungry than gag it down. We knowed how Jonah felt after so much fish.

By and by, after the hospitals were full of fever and dysentery men, some brains accidentally fell into the head of the army and we begin to get frozen beef from Australia. After that we brightened up, and begin to look and feel like white men instead of hunks of walkin' discouragement. Of course a lot of the boys died before the head moguls got any sense.

But Chicken Bill and me weren't founderin' ourselves on rice and salmon. Bill spotted the good grub and I helped him steal it. We managed to keep goin' in pretty fair shape, and now and then help out the company. Bill would steal anything that was decent to eat. He never happened to think of it, but I believe he would have stole the commandin' general's dinner while that old boy was takin' a swig of champagne.

"This is a case of fightin' for life," says he. "Here we are, ten thousand miles from friends and home and plumb forgotten by our government, with our officers enjoyin' canned butter and pickles and us real men havin' to look a fish in the face three times a day. It's every man for himself, Elmer. If ever I get out of this, and a man says salmon or rice to me, I'll bury him where he stands."

Them was Chicken Bill's exact words. And I agreed with him. He was as right as a fox.

We done pretty well in them days. Now and then Bill would lift the captain's preserves or his canned butter. He even found a way to get at the colonel's stuff and clean it out. The colonel r'ared and fired his native servants and got a new set, and sent his cook and dog-robber back to duty, and plowed around like a crazy man, but he never found out nothin'. Bill and me had eaten the truck, and a full belly keeps mighty still.

EVERYTHING went on as smooth as hot butter on roast lamb until Bill and me stole the Englishman's chickens. We overplayed a little there, I admit.

This Englishman thought the world of his blooded hens. He was a little fat, red-faced man, sweatin' and puffin' all the time. He was some sort of high mucky mogul for the British government. Bill and me got two sacks full of hens. Our cook fixed 'em up at night and we had 'em for breakfast. This was O. K., as no officer was around at breakfast and the top sergeant had been on a drunk the night before and was asleep.

But in any company there is always the tattle-tale and we had one. He goes to the top and bleats, thinkin' to get a stand-in with him. Later we find out who bleated and beat him to a jelly. But the top knows who lifted the hens and he tells the captain.

Before the captain can land on me and Bill the colonel comes chargin' over and orders the captain to fall in the company. The Englishman has been to the colonel and raised merry hell. He's told the colonel he will take it up with the Government, and that he will not rest till he gets satisfaction for his hens.

The captain is standin' back of the colonel with his ears down. The colonel gimlet-eyes the company.

"I am informed," says he, "that this company is hidin' some chicken thieves."

We see it then. The top had not only blattered to the captain but had carried the news to the adjutant, with the idea of gettin' a stand-in at headquarters. A champion sapsucker, the top.

"The guilty men will either step two paces to the front and confess," says the colonel, "or this company drills in heavy marchin' order until it learns not to protect rowdies and thieves. I'll give the guilty men one minute to step two paces to the front."

And out come his watch.

Chicken Bill didn't hesitate. He wasn't the kind to throw the load on his company.

He was number two, front rank, first set of fours. I was his left hand man.

He throws his gun to the right shoulder, steps two paces to the front, gives the colonel the rifle salute, and says sharp and clear—

"Private Brown, guilty, sir."

I could not see my old sidekick take all the load, so I slams her to the right shoulder and steps to his side.

"Me, too," says I.

"Say, 'sir' when you address me," bawls the colonel, who never forgets his importance.

I never "sirred" him, for just then a little gray man on a native pony, with some officers followin' him, rode into the gate and across the parade ground. It was the brigade commander.

That meant the colonel had to stand back and get ready to receive company. The captain was badly rattled and forgot to order Bill and me back to our places. So we stood there, at the right shoulder, eyes to the front.

The brigade commander gets off his little horse and the colonel gives him his respects.

This brigadier general was a farm boy who won the Congressional Medal of Honor in the Civil War. He's a cunnin' old rooster, and he doesn't let no colonel in his brigade get the idea a regiment is an independent outfit.

He looks over the company and he looks over Bill and me. He passes up the colonel and the captain.

"What's the trouble, my boy?" he asks Bill like an old daddy. "Speak up. Don't be afraid to tell the truth."

"I stole some chickens," Bill tells him, "from an Englishman."

The general smiles a little.

"I've heard about it," he says. Then, for good measure, he throws in, "I imagine the whole world has heard about it by this time. Our English friend has certainly made noise enough."

With that, Bill and I knowed that some time or ruther the general had stole chickens himself. We saw he was one of us.

Then he turns to me.

"What have you to say?"

"Bill there," I tells him, "confessed to stealin' the chickens to save the company trouble. I helped him steal the chickens and I'm here to share whatever he gets. He's my sidekick, sir."

For a time the general looks us over, and then he takes the colonel and the captain back a piece and has a confidential talk with them.

We can't hear what he says but we can see the gas go out of the colonel and the little captain wilt down like a lettuce leaf in a hot sun. Pretty soon the general and the colonel go over to regimental headquarters.

The captain seems to want to get out of sight of us quick, for he snaps at the top—

"Sergeant, dismiss the company!" and makes a bee line for his quarters.

That's the last Bill and me hear of the Englishman's chickens. We trades the top to another outfit for a sergeant they want beat up, and he comes in lookin' like a mess of dog meat. Tradin'? Well, when the boys wanted a top or an officer beat up, they would go to another outfit and bring back a bunch to look over the victim. Then, when said victim is down town some night, the boys of the other outfit who have looked him over start a free-for-all fight around him. In the mix-up they knock him down and tramp on him. In return we do the same with some sergeant or officer of theirs. It's a free-for-all, you see, and done so quick the fighters can't be identified; besides they're strangers to the man they're beatin' up and careful to wear no cross-guns or anything that will tell what regiment or company they're from. We give many a sergeant and officer a conscience that way.

BUT regardless of the beatin' we got for the top, and regardless of what the general had said to the cap, they managed to make it mighty hard for Bill and me. We got the dirty end of the stick right along. The top had his pets and the captain his, but they sure weren't Bill and me.

Bill stood it as long as he could and then one day he offered to tap the top's jaw. The top was a yellowbelly and run to the captain. Bill was fightin' mad and offered to tap the captain's jaw. The long and short of it was I had to horn in and so Bill and me got three months in the guardhouse. It's a wonder we didn't get ten years in military prison.

We were soon draggin' 'round doin' the dirty work of the camp, with a bayonet to help us remember. Then, one mornin', when we're sweepin' up leaves on the parade ground, who should ride in but the brigadier general. He's alone and lookin' 'round to see what he can see.

Right here, let me say, Chicken Bill had more gall than any soldier in the world. Does he go on sweepin' leaves, as the jigadier brindle comes toward us? No, siree! Before the guard can stop him, he throws his broom to the right shoulder and gives the general as purty a salute as ever I see.

The general pulls in his pony. The guard starts to move Bill on with the bayonet but the general waves him back. And dogged if the general don't return Bill's salute.

"Young man," says the old gray boy, "you seem to be enjoyin' yourself. By the way, how old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir," says Bill.

"Your name and company?"

"William Brown. K company."

Seemed to me the general was smilin' a little, but you never can tell about them old leatherfaces. Maybe it was just the wrinkles restin' themselves.

"Haven't I seen you before?"

"Yes, sir. I stole the Englishman's chickens."

The general pulls at his mustache.

"Hm-m," he says kind of to himself, "I remember now. Where is the other rascal?"

"Here, sir," says I.

"Well, what particular crime have you two committed now; stole more chickens?"

Bill explains, sparin' himself not at all.

"You realize, don't you," says the general, after Bill had unloaded, "that you must show respect to your superiors, and that an army without discipline is no army at all?"

"Yes, sir," comes back Bill quick enough, "but, if the general please, we ain't regular soldiers. All we want is enough to eat, a chance to fight and to go home when the job is done. We are volunteers, sir."

The general turns to me.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir; same as Bill."

"Children," he says to himself, pullin' at his long mustache, "just children."

Gruntin' some, he got off his pony.

"Now, boys," he says, like a kind old father, "nearly forty years ago I was like you. I, too, was eighteen when I first shouldered a musket. I was pitchin' hay when it come to me I had better go down and enlist."

He spoke just as common as though the stars on his straps meant nothin'. Later on, I read his record. It was citation after citation, honor after honor.

"Many of the officers of the Union Army were worthless," he goes on in his quiet way, "hardly worth the powder to blow 'em up, but we had to get along with them until time and battle weeded 'em out. This is a bad climate for white men, but we, too, lost thousands by sickness and neglect. We lay in the mud for days at a time, and I have gone weeks without takin' my clothes off. Many times we marched all day and half the night with no chance even to boil coffee. We had no cots in barracks, my boys; we lay on the ground, in mud or snow, just as it happened to be. And, while we were sufferin' and fightin' and dyin', we knew there were men at home gettin' rich on government contracts. But we had a job to do and we saw it through.

"Many times I was on the verge of killin' an officer, many times I fought some sergeant who had sand enough to take off his jacket. I stole chickens and everything I could lay my hands on. Had I been punished for all the crimes I committed, I would be in the guardhouse yet.

"At times I was discouraged, homesick and as bitter as could be. Often I thought of desertin'. But I finally realized that the thing to do was to make the best of it. If it was moldy hardtack, I ate it and was thankful it was no worse. If it was salt pork that they had saved over from the Mexican War, I ate it and counted it a luxury. If one of my comrades was goin' the wrong way, I helped him and so got my mind off my own troubles. If my pard weakened on the march, I found it gave me strength to carry his musket for him. I know how it is with you boys; you haven't had enough fightin'. Fightin' makes a great difference. You have been sittin' here in this heat, thinkin' about your troubles. In battle a man forgets all the little things, for in five minutes the whole scheme may be changed. The man he hated may be dead. He may be grumblin' about his officers, and in a day be an officer himself.

This is a little war, and there is not enough glory to go 'round, but we must do our duty and make the best of it."

Never did I see such a man. He soon had me and Bill as soft as mush. Danged if he didn't stand between us and put his hands on our shoulders. As sure as I live, a brigadier general with his hands on the shoulders of two boy volunteers. A brigadier general of regulars, mind you, with every honor the government could give him.

"Now, son," he says to Bill, "I am goin' to have you and your pard returned to your company." (It was "pard" in Sixty-one; "bunkie" in Ninety-eight; "buddy" in the last scrap.) "Your records will be cleared. But I am expectin' you to soldier, to do your duty in first class style, to hold your tempers and to take the bitter with the sweet."

Then more to himself than to us:

"I want all my boys to make a good showin', to get some benefit from their service. Many of them will do things in the years to come. Presidents, perhaps, distinguished citizens. Who knows what Fate has in store for them. McKinley was a boy soldier."

I've often thought of the words of the good old general. He was sure a prophet, at least when it came to Chicken Bill. As for me, I only made a lot of money, but Bill—

As I was sayin', the general had us both mushy. Bill was almost cryin'. That was my old sidekick's way. Handle that old bunkie of mine right and he would give you his heart's blood. Handle him wrong and he would die in his tracks before he would forgive or forget. I am some that way myself. To this day the men who wronged me never get my hand. I will do them no harm, but to me they are the same as dead.

"Will you do as I ask?" the general wants to know.

No doggin', none of our colonel's style, no down hill talk, just a soft voiced old man talkin' to a couple of kids like they were his sons.

Bill had such a gulp in his neck he could hardly speak.

"If the general please," he whispered, "I would like nothin' better than to die for him. I am not fit to serve under him."

The old man smiles, and pats Bill's shoulder.

Then he turns to me.

I was doggone near chokin' to death, but I managed to blubber—

"I'll go to hell and back for you, sir."

The general smiles his slow smile and gets on his horse. As he rides away, Bill and me fly at the leaves like we loved work.

The next day Bill and me were returned to our company. Don't know how the brigadier managed it, but our records were wiped clean. The little old boy had a terrible drag some way.

WE SETTLE down to soldierin'. Never a thing could an officer get on us. In spite of the top sergeant, in spite of the captain and in spite of the colonel, one or the other of us get orderly again and again. The adjutant can't help himself, for when his eye lights on Bill or me at guard mount, he sees a soldier that is perfection itself. Inspect as much as he please, he can't find a spot on us. Our guns are like the inside of a watch, we are clean and upstandin'. Between us is friendship, but each one wants to be the better soldier. And each one has the general to look up to.

Even the colonel has to lay off us, for he hasn't the nerve to ride two such soldiers. Then, too, I guess the general had taken some of the conceit out of our commandin' officer. They said, when the general got through with a colonel, the eagles on his straps had turned to doves. At least our colonel began to act more like a human bein' instead of something who thought a thousand men were made for him instead of him for them.

I don't know who was back of it, but we give the old general the credit for makin' Bill a sergeant and me a corporal.

"It's the general," says Bill, "who passes the word down to give us the chevrons. That old fox knows everything that is goin' on in his brigade. They say he knows every man in it, and never forgets nothin'—absolutely nothin'."

Of course me and Bill were always singin' the praises of the general. But we weren't the only ones. It run through the brigade—that feelin' toward him. Men bragged to other men about our brigade commander. When we saw him comin', we didn't dodge by, lookin' the other way. No, indeedy. We halted, faced out, and give him the best we had. I have seen men lined up for two blocks, standin' at attention and salutin' him as he passed. He always had a kind word for us. You can gamble that Bill and me were only too glad to slam the heels together and throw him the big salute, with a grin the size of the moon.

A brigadier should have better business, you might think, than passin' the time of day with his men, but I say a headful of red tape ain't all. A real officer wins the love and respect of his men by justice and kindness, and when he needs them, they are there. A poor officer gets their hatred and fear, and when he needs them, they leave him to hold the sack. Soldiers are human bein's before they are soldiers. A real officer don't have to dog his men to get their respect and obedience.

Some short sighted fools in our army in this last war had the idea that doggin' and court martials would make first class soldiers. They accomplished nothin' but a lot of trouble. The court martial officer is a weak officer. He tries to make punishment cover his lack of ability. Show me a captain with a lot of his men in the guardhouse and I'll show you a poor company commander. Show me a colonel that is bully-raggin' his regiment all the time, and I'll show you a poor colonel and a poor regiment.

The Germans had the doggin' idea, but they didn't win. A dogged soldier quits the moment he gets a chance. Give a dogged soldier a show, and he'll lay down, for he figgers that nobody cares anything about him and that his government is against him. Anyway I always figgered that officers were born and not made.

When the fuss with the natives started, the old brigade commander was up and down the line, here and there, and always turnin' up when he wasn't expected. We used to call him "Old Never Sleep." Our colonel we called "Jawbone." Our captain we called "Corncob," as there was mighty little to him that would give any man any nourishment. Most of us come off a farm, and so figgered a corncob wasn't worth much. I often wondered if officers ever found out what their men really thought of them. If any of them did, it must have reduced their conceit to the ranks.

Old Never Sleep might show up at four in the mornin' and he might show up at midnight. Nobody knew what he would do or when. He kept his colonels on their toes. He was a bad old boy on turnin' out a colonel at two o'clock in the mornin'.

One day the general rides up to our hole in the ground, and tells the captain he wants a good, live non-commissioned officer or two and a few men to do a little scoutin' out in front, and incidentally bring back a prisoner to make talk.

Then, as was his way, he went ahead without givin' the captain time to act.

"Sergeant Brown," he sings out to Bill, "select a corporal and five men for a scoutin' party. Your experience in chicken stealin' should fit you for scout duty. Pick your men."

Grinnin', Bill picks me and five other boys he knows he can depend on, and the general gives him some further instructions.

We slip out to our outposts, and from there creep on through the jungle. Pretty soon we surprise three natives. Before they can fire we are on to them with the gun butts. In a half second that outpost is a thing of the past.

Then we creep on. Over to our right, through the tangle, we can see part of a trench, but there is no straw hats movin' in it. The scalps of them three natives would have been enough for most non-coms, but just then Bill sniffs the air.

"Elmer," he says in a husky whisper, "I smell chicken. Maybe in coconut oil, but just the same chicken is fryin'. The general didn't say nothin' about chicken, but just the same I'm goin' to have some of it. Them gugus have laid off for dinner. Come on."

So we wiggles on like snakes. Now we began to hear faint voices, and the chicken smell is sure strong.

We wiggle on our bellies through some tall grass and then into some brush. We take a look, and I be dogged if there ain't a clear space in front of us, and then a trench on the far edge of it, with thick brush and trees back of it. We can see the dirt of an escape trench leadin' back to the brush and trees. So far as we can see, there ain't a gugu in the trench. We can hear the jabber comin' from beyond the trees.

"We got to make a run for that trench," whispers Bill. "Them gugus have laid off for a chicken dinner. If we work it right, we can make a cleanin'."

"You're in command, sergeant," I says.

At a signal from Bill we charge from the brush and tear for the trench and fall into it. There ain't a native in it. Some have left their guns leanin' against the back wall. All kinds of native junk is lyin' around, bolos, bamboo water bottles and straw hats and striped jackets.

We file through the escape trench and up into the brush. The jabber, Spanish and gugu talk, is now fairly plain. We wiggle forward until we can get a peek. We're lookin' into an openin' completely surrounded by brush and trees. Squattin' close together are about a hundred gugus eatin' chicken. There's a dozen or more wimmin waitin' on them.

Right there Bill makes his big decide. He whispers his orders to me and I get his plan to those back of me. Bill, bein' quick minded that way, has learned Spanish.

He now gathers himself for one of the biggest yells ever let loose by an American soldier.

"Surrender!" he bellers in Spanish. "You're surrounded! Move and you die!"

Talk about a hair-raisin' bluff! I was sure cold turkey, but to Bill it seemed a joke, for he was a-grinnin'.

The gugus were chilled to the hocks, absolutely paralyzed. Even the wimmin forgot to yell. It was as still as a grave.

"Captain," yells Bill, "send a detail forward to take their arms."

Then in Spanish:

"A detail is comin' to take your arms. Move, and you die!"

At a signal from Bill, every man of us began yellin' commands like we were movin' several companies. I yelled everything from "left face" to "battalions attention."

Then, leavin' me to bawl commands,

Bill led the rest into the clearin'. He had those gugus in a column of fours in jig time, and made the wimmin load up with chicken and fall in with the men. Bill had done it; it was his nerve that had turned the trick.

Then he headed them back toward our lines. I think they saw, as they neared our outposts, that they had been tricked, but none of them dared to make the first break. I brung up the rear with a handful of cartridges and the old Springfield cocked. I was sure cold until we got that column through our lines.

Seven Americans brought in around eighty gugus, and enough chicken to make a meal for a company. Not such bad work.

Our little captain wanted to horn in on the credit, and said he would take charge of the prisoners, but Bill reminded him of the brigade commander's orders.

"A soldier obeys the last order," snaps the captain.

"Not this soldier," comes back Bill, "when he's actin' under the special instructions of the brigade commander. Nothin' but a major general can ramrod me now, sir." Then, because he was young and feelin' coltish, he bawls out, "Guard detail, gugus, lady friends and chickens, *'ten-shun!* Forward *m'ch!*"

And on we go to glory.

IT COME a little while before we were mustered out in Frisco, and it was for Sergeant William Brown.

The old brigade commander had made good with us, got credit for us all, but it was for Bill, the sergeant who made the bluff and who gave the order, that the old jigadier brindle put on a special show. Maybe it wasn't just accordin' to red tape and regulations and maybe it was, but it was what the general wanted and it sure suited us.

We had been issued new uniforms and were fairly shinin' with brass and blue and white trimmin's when down come the order for the regiment to prepare to turn out lookin' its best.

Bill and me and the five boys who helped him capture the company of natives got orders to report to a certain place. We went there at the time ordered, and found the regiment waitin' for us. We were lined up, facin' the regiment, and the general, who was runnin' the party, had our adjutant read what our government thought about Bill, myself and the other boys. What the adjutant read didn't make us feel bad. I thought I was standin' at attention, but I straightened up more and yet more again, till a ramrod was a corkscrew aside of me.

Then the brigade commander, followed by a staff officer carryin' a leather box, came up to Bill.

"Sergeant," says the old general, "your country is proud of you."

Then he reached back, and the staff officer opened the little box, and there it lay, with its long blue ribbon. I stood a little stiffer.

Then, like a lovin' father, the general put the Congressional Medal of Honor on Bill Brown. He had one himself, but that didn't matter. He'd got used to his. Bill was so young and so damned good lookin' that I guess it pleased the old general to just look at him. Besides it was a fine California day, and life was sure sweet. I forgave everybody, even the chaplain. I forgave even the slum and all the old sores. The slate was clean.

The general shakes hands with Bill, and then with all of us. We have been honored, but it is Bill who gets the big red rose.

The general takes Bill by the arm and leads him out in front of us all. Then he and his officers step back of us, for it is soldiers' day and soldiers' glory, and the old general leaves us alone and steps back humbly in what you might call the line of file closers. But Bill Brown is out in front, and alone, alone, alone.

Get me now, this was the general's special way of puttin' on a party. Maybe it wasn't regulations, but it sure made a hit with me.

First thing we know the regiment began the uproar that tells it's on the move. It breaks in a column of fours from the right, with the band blarin' at the head. 'Way out in front, alone, with that medal hangin' on his chest, stands Bill Brown, the volunteer soldier.

The fours are turnin' to the left in a column of companies. The barkin' of officers and the swishin' of feet and all the commotion that rises when troops are swingin' toward you.

The colonel, ridin' far ahead, throws up his saber, and drops the point to what is on the chest of Sergeant Bill Brown. Had the President of the United States been there, he would have had to take his hat off to what was on Bill's chest. And, say, that was some chest!

It come to me then that there was something in my old sidekick I'd never noticed before. He was a natural born officer. He looked right at home reviewin' troops, sergeant or no sergeant.

The band is playin' the "Stars and Stripes Forever." I guess that was the only tune our bandmaster ever learned, for he'd play it day in and day out. But right then it put wings on our souls, believe me. It had a sweep and a swing to it that made the heart rock.

Then here come the boys, in a column of companies. As each company got within the proper distance of Bill Brown, they brought the old Springfields down to the port. *Ker-r-ack!* went the gun slings. But Bill didn't return no such common stuff as a captain's or major's salute. So far, nothin' but the colonel's.

But now came our old girl, a-tossin' her bright colors, a-gleamin' with red and gold. What the hell is there about that old rag above steel that gets a man so! I've saluted it a million times, I got so sick and tired of it that I would sneak by it whenever I got a chance. But now I thought it the most beautiful thing in the world. Lord love her, she was dippin' to Bill Brown and us!

It was a graceful little bow, just enough to let us know she loved us still. Me and the five were under arms, and so did not uncover. But, without previous instructions and as one man, we slammed 'em down to the present. Then Bill did something that I guess was not down in the book. He give the colors the rifle salute; but, as his fingers left the stock, they raised to his lips, and he threw a kiss to Red, White and Blue.

Company after company, the white-gloved hands a-swingin', the young faces a-grinnin', the lines perfect, the step like a heart-beat. *Port arms! Port arms! Port Arms!*

It was done. The regiment passed on into darkness, you might say. Never will I see it again as it was that day, with the sunlight flashin' on its steel and brass, with the young faces grinnin'. It swept on, never to return, never to gather again, never again to swing by in review. How sorrowful a thing it is for a regiment to break up! We weren't long together and had had no scrappin' to speak of. What then must it be to veterans bound together with four or five years of hard fightin'! How hard, then, must it be to see the old outfit fall apart!

Soon the time come when me and Bill had to part. I go home, get married and make money in land and cattle. First thing I know I got a boy near the age I was when I volunteered. Bill got himself a commission in the regulars. At first he wrote me, but by and by I lost track of him. The years are hard on friendship.

Then when the war with Germany broke, I could just do nothin' with that boy of mine. He was rarin' to go. He was under draft age, but that didn't matter to him. He was sure about as crazy as I was in 'Ninety-eight. I saw my boy would never be contented till he got in, and so I helped him get a commission and away he goes, a natural-born volunteer. I tell him to watch out for wimmin, poor grub and bad water, and don't let nobody hand him nothin', and to remember his dad was back of him with his last dollar.

"Son," I says, "you dad ate slum and come out glad to throw his uniform off and never see it again, but you're goin' like a gentleman. Hold your temper, guard your health, but fight like hell."

He's a big strappin' cuss for his age,

my boy, but he throws his arms around me and smacks me like he was four years old. And away he goes, laughin' and smilin' back at us—mother and me.

Right after that I don't read much but casualty reports. I don't rest well at night, and I oversmoke. Of course I don't whine none, but it's a dreary job waitin' for your only son to get back from war. Oh, I wouldn't have had him stay home, and was so proud of him, but then—

Well, thank cripes, the day come when the thing was at an end. I run into the house and got mother and it was hail-ka-daisy for a spell.

The next mail brought a long letter from our boy. He said he'd been decorated by his government and by the French government, too. He said my old comrade, Major General William Brown, pinned the U. S. medal on him—distinguished service. Can you imagine how I felt! Chicken Bill pinnin' the distinguished service medal on my boy—my kid! I couldn't read the rest of the letter, I was so full.

That young'n I knew years ago, a major general! Back come to me the picture. Old Bill out there in front of us, alone, alone with his glory, and the regiment sweepin' by at the port.

I gathered up mother and we hit the trail for New York and settle down to wait for the kid. It seemed like a thousand years before they begin to land.

Of course mother had to have him first. I just stood back, with my jaw a-jumpin' while she smothered him with kisses. When he gets free of her he turns to me. I look him up and down. He's ribbons to no end and a cord over his shoulder, and he's an upstandin', fine-lookin' officer. But he's my boy, after all, and he jumps into his old dad's arms.

Then, all of a sudden, my boy broke loose from me and come to attention.

Comin' toward us is a hard faced officer with a clipped mustache restin' on top of an iron jaw. Back of Iron Jaw trails his staff. On his straps are the two stars of a major general, and he's carryin' enough ribbons to make a crazy quilt.

I'm an independent man and do not hate myself. I made no move, as I wasn't sure that this major general, cold as chilled steel, would play a come back to what was surgin' in my heart for him.

But it was a mean, miserable little thought on my part, for the next moment this commander of one of America's fightin' divisions had charged down on me, stars, ribbons and all, and grabbed me in his arms, in a rib crackin' bear hug.

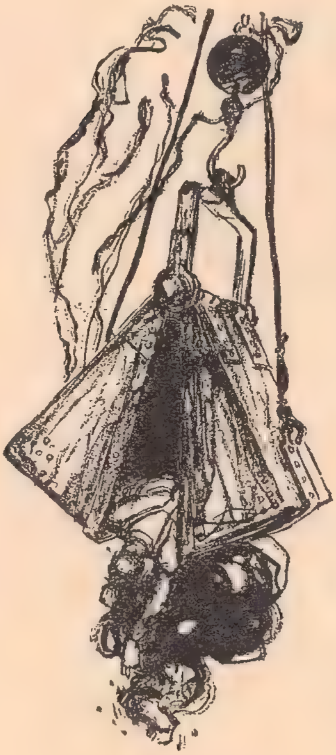
"Elmer, you damned old scoundrel!" he yells.

"Bill," I almost blubber, "you blamed old chicken thief!"

Ashes

By T. T. FLYNN

How a man's soul was tested in a railroad yard pit



REPUGNANT, ugly, the main shops of the D. & R. system sprawl in a mass of soot coated buildings, steel rails, gaunt traveling cranes, belching smokestacks and great piles of metal parts, some red leaded against the elements, some crimsoned by the bite of rust. Over all lies dirt and grease and noise. Huge locomotives lumber about, vomiting clouds of black smoke and adding the discordance of their whistles and bells to the din of bellowing blowers, the rumble of cranes and the growl and mutter of many machines.

On the fringe of the plant is the ash pit. Beneath great slat-work sections of covering, deep, still waters, capped with restless tongues of vapor, brood. There was a time when the pit lay uncovered, but at night men blundered out of the darkness and vanished, to be hauled forth days later by Juan Mendoza and his great clamshell bucket. So the pit was covered and the bucket lifts the sections as Juan desires.

Tracks run beside the pit and concrete slides catch the smoking contents of the locomotive ash cans and guide them, hissing and plopping, down into the deadening waters.

High in the air over the pit Juan Mendoza sits in a little traveling cage and, from midnight until eight in the morning, guides the great clamshell bucket as it scoops the ashes from the bottom and deposits them in the waiting cars. A short, slight young fellow, Juan, mild mannered, quiet and shy; his features the olive tint of the Latin; his English softly slurred at times. Friendly is Juan, too, and kind.

It was that strain in him which made him stop one night when he fancied that he heard a sound of distress. The hour was near midnight, and he was on his way to work, walking between dark, brooding lines of freight cars in the upper yard. The sound he heard was faint, made even more so by the crunch of his feet on the cinders and the distant noise of a yard engine shifting some cars. But there was a quality about it that touched him, and he stopped and listened intently.

In a moment the sound came again, a plaintive whimper, muffled, elusive as to its whereabouts.

Juan stood irresolute. He had no time

to spare, and excuses counted for little after the midnight whistle blew. While he hesitated the whimper came again. It was too much for the gentle soul of Juan. He investigated.

The sound seemed to come from the next line of cars over. He gripped his bag of lunch between his teeth and clambered over the couplings between two cars; and by dint of listening and searching he came to its source. It was the door of an empty freight car, jarred open an inch or so.

When his crunching steps halted before the door there was a moment's silence. Then, through the crack came a faint, hesitating whimper, pleading yet doubtful. Juan set himself and pushed the door back with a shriek of rusty hinges. He carried a small pocket flashlight and he pressed the button and threw the beam into the dark, cavernous interior of the car.

The light picked out the author of the sounds, a puppy, all feet and legs and head. But it was not fat and sleek and healthy, as puppies should be. Its bones stood out starkly, and its gaunt, starved body spoke of days spent without food and water. A puppy from some far city, without doubt; an unwanted puppy who had been shut in the car by a heartless owner and sent away into the unknown.

Juan looked at the starved outcast cowering back in the beam of light, and clucked in pity. And then he spoke gently. A moment the puppy listened and then its tail stirred, its body trembled and finally it crawled toward the glaring eye of light and the friendly voice that came from behind. When it came within reach, Juan set his bag of lunch on the car floor and gathered the small bundle of skin and bones to him.

The puppy whimpered with content; the last of its fear fled and it lifted its head and licked him on the cheek.

Because he was late Juan did not tarry on the spot. He placed the puppy in the crook of his left arm and picked up his bag of lunch with his right hand. As he hastened on toward the shops he made shift to open the bag of lunch and break off bits of sandwiches and give them to the starved one.

By the time Juan had gotten his time card and made his way through the shops to the ash pit, his heart was lost to the snuggling bundle which nestled in the crook of his arm. And the puppy pushed its nose deep between his arm and side and breathed slowly with pure contentment.

SO THEY came out of the night, into the smoky area of the ash pit lights, and then into the brighter glare of the small building which stood beside the pit. This held the lockers of the pit crews and served as their general headquarters. Inside the door Juan halted and blinked for a moment. The puppy took its head from beneath his arm and looked about with interest.

The members of the twelve to eight trick were gathered inside, donning their work clothes and talking. At the sight of the puppy they stopped speaking and gave it their undivided attention. One, Thompson by name, asked—

"Where'd you get him?"

"I found heem," Juan answered.

"Where?"

"In a freight car."

"Sort of a hobo dog, eh?"

And the men laughed. Juan set the pup down on the floor and then straightened up and shook his head.

"No, a poor puppee who had a cruel master," he said, and then added comfortably, "But that is past. He is feexed for all right now."

"Goin' to keep him?"

Juan nodded.

"What's his name?"

Juan hesitated, and then a smile came over his face.

"Sammee," he said. "From thees time on he will be Sammee."

Sammee looked up at the men with a friendly air. And the men responded and called to him and whistled and snapped their fingers. One however did not. He was Smith, a man who had but lately come to the pit. A rather short man was Smith, but not slight. His frame was broad and heavy set and he leaned slightly forward as he walked, suggesting a great ape. One eye had been gouged out in some brawl, and it gave to his countenance a malignant cast.

Smith looked at Sammee scornfully with his one eye, blinked the lid several times over the bloodshot ball and asked:

"Why didn't you knock him in the head? He's half dead anyway."

Juan shrugged and flashed his teeth in a smile.

"He will live," he said. "And I like heem. He is nice."

"How, nice?" demanded Smith with a sneer. "He's just a mongrel pooch, not worth shooting."

Juan turned his head and looked Sammee over carefully before he answered—

"Well—I don' know how nice—just nice."

Smith hunched his gorilla-like shoulders and growled—

"If he was mine I'd knock him in the head an' pitch him in the pit."

There was a moment's silence at his words. And in that silence Sammee cocked his head up at Smith and then deliberately turned his back upon him.

Thompson led the laughter.

"He hasn't got any use for you, Smith," he roared. "Read you like a book, he did."

Smith scowled; and when the laughter kept up he shouldered his way to the door and went out into the night. As he passed Sammee he gave the pup a venomous glance from his one good eye.

Juan was looking down at the puppy and did not observe it. Sammee yawned and Juan placed his lunch bag on a bench and made him a bed with some clean waste that was lying around. Then he opened his locker and put on his work clothes. When the midnight whistle sounded he went forth to his night's work, not forgetting to fill an empty can with water and set it before Sammee.

FROM that night Sammee and Juan became inseparable. Each night the puppy came to work with his master. And while Juan glided to and fro, high over the pit in the control cage of the crane, Sammee snoozed on the bed of waste that Juan fixed for him or went on short exploring expeditions around the outside of the small building.

Smith the one eyed, gorilla framed, persisted in his dislike. He said loudly and often that dogs like that should be put out of the way. Every time that Sammee crossed his path he aimed a kick or a curse at him.

Sammee, in turn, quickly became aware of Smith's enmity, avoided walking near him. Finally his repulsion became so great that when Smith came too near him the hairs on his neck would lift and a growl would issue—not perhaps as fierce as he imagined it to be, but a growl nevertheless—all of which furnished fuel for the flame of Smith's dislike.

Once, when the men were gathered together for the twenty-minute lunch period, he stated that if Sammee ever bit him he would kill the dog at once. Juan was sitting on the floor and Sammee was lying between his outstretched legs. Juan dropped his hand on Sammee's back in a caress and said to Smith—

"He will not hurt you."

Smith glowered across the room at the two of them and snapped:

"I know damn' well he won't! But if he tries it—I'll fix him!"

"He is but a small puppee," said Juan defensively.

"He'll be a dead pup one of these days," growled Smith.

Juan was troubled by the threat. He had a peace loving disposition and did not know exactly how to deal with the truculent Smith; so he did not reply, and after a moment went on eating his lunch.

Early the very next night Sammee brought the wrath of Smith down upon him. Smith had slipped on a loose clinker. To balance himself he threw out a hand and seized the nearest support, the main rod of an engine that was then on the pit. The rod was covered with dirty grease and oil and Smith's hand was fouled with it. He had no waste in his pocket and went to the locker building for some.

Juan, as was his custom, had gathered the stock of clean waste into a bundle and made a little bed in one corner for Sammee. The puppy was curled up on it when Smith entered.

Smith stalked into the door, looked about the room, saw there was no waste but that under the puppy and advanced across the room with an oath. Sammee watched him approach. The hairs on his neck rose up and a tiny growl rumbled in the back of his throat. As Smith reached down to throw him off the waste, he gave a deeper growl and opened his small mouth threateningly.

In none too good humor anyhow, Smith halted and swore a great oath. His one eye flamed and he looked swiftly about the room. There was an old battered brake-stick leaning in one corner and he lurched across to it. Sammee sensed trouble and arose from his bed and warily started for the door. And when Smith picked up the brake-stick and charged at him, he fled through the door into the night, his voice raised in shrill yelps.

Juan, high in the air, heard him and saw, through the half-gloom of the pit lights, the squat figure of Smith dash out of the building after him, the battered brake-stick held threateningly in one hand. Juan stopped the crane and made his way down to the ground as quickly as he could.

He met Smith returning from an unsuccessful chase into the darkness that lay beyond the rays of the pit lights.

"Sammee—" demanded Juan anxiously. "Where is he?"

"The little devil's out there somewhere," snarled Smith. "He got away this time, but I'll get him as soon as he shows his nose."

"What did he do?" asked Juan in a troubled voice.

"Tried to bite me!" flamed Smith. "I told you if he ever did it I'd kill him. He's as good as dead now."

"He did not bite you?"

"He tried to!"

"Then," said Juan stoutly, "you shall do nothing to heem. He is but a puppee."

"The hell I won't!" declared Smith, his one eye flaming.

His love for Sammee gave Juan unexpected spirit.

"The hell you weel!" he retorted.

Smith looked at the slight little mild mannered Juan and was speechless with astonishment for a moment. He would as soon have expected the unfortunate Sammee to turn and charge him as to see a show of spirit from his master. In a moment speech returned and he grunted savagely.

"You heard me! And if you get fresh I'll beat you up afterward."

Without deigning to say more he shouldered by and returned to his work.

Juan sighed and went in search of Sammee. After a little, by dint of calling and keeping out in the darkness, he found him. Lest there be further trouble at the time, he took Sammee under his arm and carried him up into the control cage of the crane.

There, on the floor of the little cage, between Juan's feet, Sammee lay until the four o'clock whistle blew. But the whir and growl of the motors overhead and the snap and spark of the controls kept Sammee in a constant state of terror. So, when he descended to eat his lunch, Juan took Sammee down with him. Although Juan was mild of disposition he was not a coward, and he did not think that Smith would harm the dog while he was around.

In that he was correct. With the first flush of rage over, Smith lost some of his lust for the instant death of Sammee, but he still retained his hate. So much of it showed in his face that Juan took his bag of lunch and went outside. There, on a box by the side of the door, he sat and munched the food. And for amusement, after Sammee had eaten, Juan took a small stick and began to throw it off, that Sammee might bring it back to him. It was the first of many tricks that he hoped to teach his pet.

Sammee had learned his lesson well. When the stick left Juan's hand he would dash after it at top speed. And when it had fallen to the ground and he had picked it up and given it a few shakes, he brought it back at once. So, for some minutes they played, and both became absorbed in the game.

Neither saw Smith finish his lunch and lean against the inside of the doorway. Neither had an inkling of the thought that came to Smith, a thought that twisted his face into a leer and made his one eye glitter with anticipation.

THE LUNCH period came to an end. Down the tracks, at the inspection pit, the inspectors finished another locomotive and one of them backed it off and started toward the ash pit. That stretch of track was on a down grade and the monster locomotive slipped silently along, tender first.

Juan picked up the stick and gave it an extra hard toss. Up into the darkness it went, and off Sammee dashed after it. He did not locate it at once and ran around in little circles, searching. Suddenly, another stick, a larger stick, sailed out of the doorway, clattered on the inside rail of the tracks, and slipped down into the water. Sammee heard the noise, thought his master had thrown another stick, and dashed frantically to where it had fallen. Over the first track he went and looked questioningly down into the pit. And while he gazed, the monster steel tender slipped swiftly down out of the night and blotted life from him with one sickening crunch.

Juan had seen the stick sail through the air, had followed Sammee's movements with his eyes, without thinking. The end had come as a complete surprise to him also. He sat in stunned silence as the locomotive came to a halt, and then, back of him, a laugh of satisfaction burst forth.

"Now he's a good dog," jeered Smith.

Slowly Juan stood up and turned around. For an instant he looked at the leering face of Smith and a tide of blinding rage welled up in him.

"You are a devil!" he said thickly, and ran at Smith, his fists flailing.

It was little more than a gesture. Smith would have made two of him. The one eyed one received him with anticipation. The shower of blows that Juan rained he parried easily. And then he set himself, swung one of his long, powerful arms and caught Juan full in the pit of the stomach.

There was nothing more to it. Juan staggered back into the night and collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony. Smith looked at him and laughed.

"I guess that'll fix you for a while," he said with satisfaction.

The whistle sounded, the men went back to their work before Juan recovered from the effects of the terrible blow. Slowly he dragged himself up from the ground, deathly sick, and staggered over to the box by the door, where he could sit down.

For some minutes he rested on the box, sick in body and sick in mind. Sammee had been his one true friend. And Sammee was gone. A great ache filled his heart.

No one noticed him and presently he stood up and walked over to the bottom of the ladder leading up to the crane. He was still weak and he leaned against the side of the pillar, postponing the ascent for a moment.

His eyes, wandering aimlessly about, came to rest on the great steel crane bucket. It hung motionless, rusted, scarred—an inanimate thing of steel. Yet, for him, every night it ceased to be just a bucket, became instead almost a part of himself.

At the thought Juan looked at the bucket with increasing interest. It did as he willed. The great mass of steel, the thick cables, were his to command. By them he was metamorphosed into a colossus who scooped great handfuls of ashes from far beneath the surface of the deep water filled ash pit and cast them unerringly to one side. On the ground he was small, puny. But the moment he entered the little cage, high above, he ceased to be himself—became instead a cable thewed giant capable of prodigious feats of strength; capable of—yes, capable of crushing those beneath him if he so desired. Even the gorilla framed Smith was but a puny thing when he, Juan Mendoza, stood in his little cage high in the air. Smith, with all his strength, could never do to him what he could do to Smith from above.

Juan stood away from the pillar and lifted his shoulders. The pain in his stomach fled, the slight giddiness which had clung to him disappeared. A strange, sweet, new strength, a sense of power, of confidence, stole through him. A flash of inspiration appeared to him.

SMITH was standing outside the engine directing a hose into the ash pan. Juan stepped on the slat work that covered the deep, brooding waters of the pit and walked to his side.

Smith saw him approach, glowered at him, and when he was close said—

"Well, what d'you want?"

Juan looked up at him sternly.

"I tell you—look out," he said slowly. "Thees night you will be sorree."

Smith scowled.

"What's eatin' you?" he demanded. "Didn't you get enough?"

Juan stared at him silently.

"I tell you, look out," he said evenly, and turned away.

Smith watched him go in silence. After a moment he broke it with an oath and turned back to his work.

Swiftly Juan climbed to the top of the ladder. Moving carefully lest he touch the live power wire, he crawled on the crane and stood up. He was high above the pit lights, above everything, standing in pitch darkness. Below stretched the world of the shops, a distant world it seemed. The day-time cacophony was subdued. A deep, murky gloom, broken and slashed by feeble lights and flickering torches turned the shops into a vast hive of the unknown.

There was movement on the ground, but of a sort that slipped silent and unseen through the darkness. One moment nothing, the next the looming shadow of a locomotive, or of a car. A swing around a corner and a collision with a ghostly workman. A voice calling, the source drowned by the all pervading darkness. Winking pinpoints of light bobbing along with no apparent support; a Stygian world in which all things were possible—and probable.

Juan looked about him and drew a deep breath. Up there, high above everything, he seemed infinitely removed from the earth, a part, almost, of the sky overhead. There was something about it that had always thrilled him, that had sent the blood racing through his veins in joy and brought, many times during the night, songs caroling to his lips.

But there was no joy in Juan's heart then, no song on his lips. A great hurt filled him, a bitterness. And there was something more, something the sight of the bucket had put into his mind. With a last look about, he made his way over the motors and cable drums until he reached the roof of the little control cage. He stooped, pushed back a small slide, felt with his foot, found the top rung of a ladder inside, and descended.

From the glassed windows of the little cage he could look out on all sides. On his right was the ready lot filled with locomotives, repaired, greased, coaled and watered, waiting for their runs. On his left, the dark outlines of the shop buildings were etched indistinctly in vagrant rays of light. Through the open trapdoor in the roof a lone star looked down upon him.

Below him in the murky light that shrouded the pit stood the engine. At its side—Smith. Juan eyed him rigidly. The muscles in his jaw set and his hands slipped over to the controller handles. Then before he could do anything, the locomotive below slipped off the pit with a soft purr of exhausts. Smith, his work finished for the moment, walked off the slatwork covering of the pit.

Juan relaxed with an impatient exclamation. But there were no more locomotives below at the moment and, with a final bitter glance at the back of Smith, he went to work. His hands moved swiftly between the different controller handles. The cage swung out over the pit. At the same moment other motors overhead whirred and the great clamshell bucket dropped.

On the section of slatwork covering over which the cage hovered, a five-foot length of I-shaped steel was bolted. Juan stopped the downward rush of the bucket a few inches above the steel beam. Then, gently, he set it down and closed the huge jaws tightly in the channel of the I.

He touched another control and the bucket arose without effort, lifting the half-ton section of slatwork covering by its bite on the I-beam. As the bucket lifted, the crane slipped down the pit a few feet. There, clear of the gaping square of water which the section had uncovered, the bucket settled. The section came to rest easily; the bucket jaws unclasped; the crane swung back over the open water.

FOR THE next hour Juan worked steadily. His hands moved constantly between the controls. The bucket dropped down, down, disappeared beneath the water, and still dropped. It touched the bottom; the cables slackened. He moved another control. The cables tightened, one more taut than the rest. Far below the surface the great jaws bit deep into the piles of ashes and closed on a huge bite. The cables stilled a moment and then began to slip smoothly up out of the water. The top of the bucket broke the surface, then the main part, and then it rose into the air, cascading water and ashes back on the black surface of the water. With a sweep the bucket traveled over to the string of empty ash cars which stood on the tracks at one side of the pit. Over the cars the bucket jaws yawned, the wet ashes dropped and the bucket swooped back for another bite.

Another locomotive slipped over the pit, and Smith again appeared on the slatwork covering, farther away. The crane gradually shifted down the pit, nearer and nearer to where he was working. His figure appeared plain through the uncertain light. Finally he looked up. The bucket was in mid-swoop, the jaws hanging open and loose. As Smith's glance met his, Juan snapped the jaws shut. And as they clanged together ominously Juan scowled.

Smith turned back to his work. But when, on the next swoop from the ash cars the jaws again snapped in mid air, he started slightly. Juan, who was watching closely, smiled grimly to himself.

The locomotive presently moved off, but another one took its place at once. Juan finished the spot where he was working, replaced the covering, and opened up a new one, almost beside where Smith was working.

He carried the half-ton covering from the new opening over behind Smith, stilled it at a foot in the air, then opened the bucket jaws and released it. At the crash and tremor of the impact, Smith started and cursed. He turned, his face twisted with rage and shouted up—

"Watch out there, you fool, you'll kill some one yet!"

Juan thrust his head through the window and called down—

"I tell you—look out!"

"Look out hell! I'll look out for you when you come down!" snarled Smith. "You'll get some more of the medicine you got awhile ago!"

"If you are alive," Juan called back. And he suddenly snapped the jaws of the bucket as it hung in the air. It was near Smith's head and he ducked. As the bucket swung away, Juan looked down and laughed aloud.

Smith clenched a great fist and shook it savagely. He stood undecided, but Juan paid him no further attention and he presently turned back to his work.

For ten minutes they worked, the one

guiding the bucket, the other cleaning the ash pan. And then the locomotive backed off the pit and another took its place. The new engine stopped so that Smith was compelled to stand at the edge of the gaping hole into which the bucket was dropping.

From above Juan watched him, calculating. It was so easy to drop the bucket on him, clutch him tight, and plunge him down beneath the dark waters of the pit. It would not take long. A very few minutes and Sammee would have a companion.

He thought of Sammee, and the laugh that had come from Smith when Sammee died. Sudden rage swept him and he halted the bucket in mid-air and started it on a swoop in the direction of the squat figure below.

Something stayed him. He checked the bucket, swung it back and dropped it down beneath the waters. And as he did so, he fiercely berated himself. It was so easy; might well be an accident.

While he turned the matter over in his mind, the bucket scooped the last of the ashes from the pit bottom and came up half full. Juan dropped them into the ash car and halted the bucket in mid air. It was his last chance. Not that night would another such opportunity occur.

They would probably be separated by yards in another few minutes. No chance for an accident then. And when eight o'clock came, and he was on the ground again, Smith might do as he promised—probably would.

Juan's hands strayed over the controller handles. He tensed—but the moment passed. He drew a deep breath.

"No!" he muttered to himself in Spanish. "I will not kill!"

And he lowered the bucket to swing the section in place. The jaws closed on the I-beam, gripped, the cables tautened and the heavy section arose. High Juan swung it. And as he slowed it in the air, one edge dipped down. Down it went, towards Smith. Juan saw, and leaned from the window to shout a warning.

Smith looked up, saw the great section in the air above him, tilting down, down, upon him. Already nervous, he sprang back in alarm. His heel slipped between the two slats and caught. He tripped, fell backward and his head struck against the great steel trailer casting of the engine. He uttered no sound. His body went inert; he rolled to one side and slipped into the brooding waters of the pit with a sullen splash. The heavy rubber boots he wore carried him under at once.

Juan leaned far out and gazed at the swirl in the dark waters below. It subsided, the floating blanket of cinders drew together and heaved in diminishing swells over the spot. The sound of a tolling bell from a departing locomotive came muffled through the eery hush of the early morning. At the sound Juan shuddered and crossed himself.

"Dios! It is the will of God!" he said to himself fiercely.

FIVE minutes, three minutes, and it would all be over. No one had seen. He had but to turn his head, to light a cigaret, nay just to scramble out across the crane and spend futile minutes summoning help, and the thing would be done.

He looked down at the black water, and suddenly a shudder wrenched him and he cried:

"Santa Maria! I can not!"

He jerked back inside and his hands flashed to the controls. With a lurch the crane rumbled down the pit. The bucket dropped, and while it was descending the jaws opened and allowed the heavy section to fall the last five feet.

Back over the opening the crane sped. The last tiny tremor on the surface had smoothed out. The water lay black and silent below.

Juan leaned out, suddenly cool. The crane stopped and the bucket dropped. He watched it disappear beneath the surface. Somewhere below was Smith. Somewhere, and the black water was thirty feet deep!

It was Juan, not the bucket, who

reached down with a great mailed fist. Deep he groped, to the very bottom. Slowly, skilfully, that he might not injure with the power of his might, he felt about. The world of men, the shops, faded as the whole of his mind centered on the bit of bottom deep below.

With his cable thewed muscles he groped, foot by foot. And at last he was rewarded. Gently he closed the jaws. They gripped. He stayed them. A motor overhead whirred. The wet, sleek cables slipped up out of the water. The top of the bucket broke water. Juan leaned far out and watched breathlessly. Up, first the pulley at the top, then the half opened jaws. Then—a dark object between the jaws.

Juan exhaled his bated breath in a rush of relief. He swung the bucket to one side, laid the great bulk of Smith carefully on the slatwork covering and then lifted the bucket and swung it to one side. He gazed down at the sprawling figure for a moment and swallowed. And as he turned to the ladder at his back and started for aid, he murmured philosophically:

"Dios! It is the will of God!"

And the lone star looked down through the trap door overhead and blinked approvingly.

Casualty Lists

By

LEONARD H. NASON

ONE OF the War Department's little jokes was the casualty list. Three or four dead, three seriously wounded, half a dozen slightly wounded.

I saw an American paper at the time the lists for the Château-Thierry affair must have been available. There were thirty names on the lists. I showed this to Baldy Bryden and Telazowski.

"Publishin' thirty names a day," said Baldy, "they won't get to St. Mihiel till 1925."

Telazowski, who was the captain's dog-robber, wrinkled his brows in an effort at concentration.

"Twenty year," he cried, wagging his head, "twenty year, an' you an' me an' sergunt, our names on list."

The rain tapped on the elephant iron and distant shells hiccoughed.

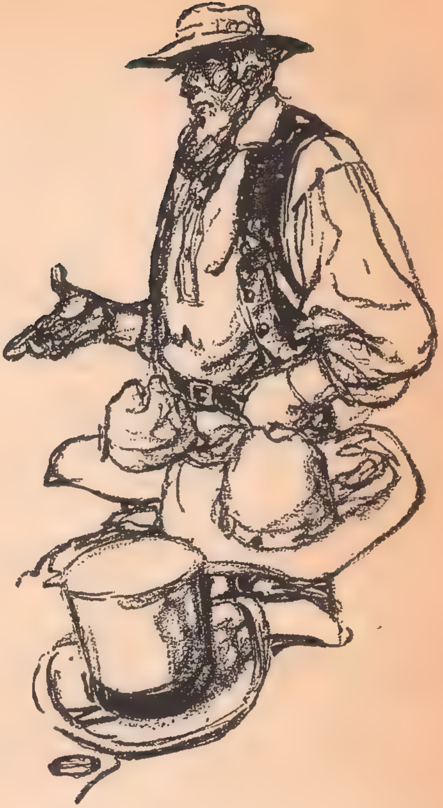
"Not me," said I. "Once is enough. I won't be hit again." (This was during the first days of the Argonne and I was already wearing one gold chevron on my right cuff.) Baldy looked rather nervous, but said nothing. I know he thought Telazowski was a jinx. Subjects such as possible death or wounds were taboo.

Eh bien, I was hit the next day and Baldy went through without a scratch. I had been discharged from the Army four months and the war had been over a long time, before my family were notified that I had been wounded the first time, and about three months later my name appeared in the casualty list for my second wound. It was spelled Mason instead of Nason, and had a wrong address.

The Preventive Execution

A Vigilance Committee and a Killer of the North Oregon Trails

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS



THE COMMITTEE of Law and Order met here and there clandestinely to discuss pressing problems. Usually they came to Deck and Landers' store, a building of central position and large size, easily secluded from eavesdropping and locked against intruders. But some times they met at the stage coach barn and corral. Occasionally they went out to a certain rock or juniper tree. Composed of men who strictly minded their own business, the committee took cognizance of those whose activities interfered with their peace and troubled their mass conscience.

Some one had started a new dance hall, gambling den and saloon out near the Big Camp where the passersby on the Northern Oregon trail stopped. The committee met here one night to discuss a rather delicate problem. There had been a cleanup of rascals over in the Carson City country, and some of the exiled scoundrels had come over to Buckshot. These newcomers were welcome as long as they behaved themselves or bothered only their own hard kind.

Wildcat Ames had come with the rest. He was a lithe, huge, handsome fellow, preferring tawny buckskins and red kerchiefs as his standard of garb. He had come into Salt Lake City, where he behaved himself, knowing the consequences if he didn't. The Carson City cleanup had not caught him for he had left before the ruction. Now he met a good many of his old cronies, and they had preempted a dugout over on the draw, where they had their hangout.

Three of the committee knew Ames' record back in the Missouri valley. He had been a robber, attacking stages, merchants and others. One of his exploits had been to lead the party of men who boarded the Missouri River packet *White Swan*, herding all the crew and passengers into the bow of the boat and forcing the purser to open the safe. This robbery at the Otter Slide woodyard had been sensational. The country grew too hot for Ames, who worked his way west and now had come to Buckshot.

Except for one miner with a small poke of gold, who had struck a pocket up Alder Gulch and who was a stranger to everybody, flocking always by himself, Wildcat Ames hadn't bothered anybody in Buckshot. The miner had accused him of cheating, so in the fight that followed the best man had won and they buried the gold finder out on the hill.

Now the signs were bad. In the old days, six months before, Buckshot had been really violent. Now the clandestine committee activities had proved to be sedative. About every so often somebody would get bad and by doing unnecessary meanness or killing somebody out of his class would attract unfavorable notice. Then people going home or going to work about sunrise would find this particular individual hanging at some convenient place, like the post pole above a corral gate, or from the arch beam over a new store entrance, or down on the wash bottom where there was a cottonwood with a strong limb. This tree was quite a way out, nearly a mile, but it was used if there weren't convenient a nearer, neutral point of suspension. In face of such mysterious deaths Buckshot had quieted markedly.

AROUND Wildcat Ames were gathering some very suspicious characters. They weren't exactly gamblers, though they played the games a lot. They weren't meat or skin hunters, though they killed a good deal of game, caught some furs and rode the wilds a lot. They didn't figure as bad men, exactly, though now and then they fought in a difficulty and killed their own kind or equally useless and unregretted citizenry. The committee, listening around, realized at last that the Wildcat was the nucleus of a gang of robbers, horsethieves and lawlessness.

The way things were in Buckshot there wasn't really any government. Every man must be for himself. Unorganized, individual and self contained, a good many hundred people had gathered here in the advantages of converging trails, good water and a rich gold and game country. The committee had flocked together in a kind of mutual self defense. The individuals had no time, no inclination to take up the burdens of sheriff, judge and law enforcement. All they asked was to be let alone.

Wildcat Ames was relatively a stranger, a new arrival. He had come alone, most of his followers back in Missouri having been rounded up and destroyed. Given time, he would have another more ferocious gang around him and then no business would be safe and no man would be beyond his menace. Every one knew that, so the word had gone around to consider the case of Ames. In another month he might be the bully of the town, boss of the diggings and so safely entrenched as to be beyond the reach of the handful of business men of the committee.

"We'd better go get and hang him and be done with it," Deck suggested. "We all know he's bad. Jefferson, here, knew him in St. Louis and up to Council Bluffs. We all know Ame's reputation."

"But he hasn't really done anything yet!" some one else objected. "We've always had something definite to bring against a man."

The argument showed a sharp division in the committee. Those who wanted preventive measures could not overcome the conservatism of those who wished to take a slow, sure pace in what was, at best, makeshift law.

"This territory's bound to be organized before long," Rupert Snawshall declared. "Then we'll have law, government and officials. In fact, I had a letter from my former law partner in Springfield, Illinois, that next year at the latest we'll have National Representatives out here, and then we can go ahead along legal lines."

"And by next year," another retorted, "Ames'll have us all buffaloed, some of us dead and any of us glad to get away with our skins whole. This country is just suited to his talents. He's a raw but able man. He comes from New England some where, but he went bad when his parents came to St. Louis when he was a boy. We'd better get him now before he gets us. It's no satisfaction to the dead victims of a scoundrel when the law comes poking along to make life easier for the survivors."

THE MEETING broke up without doing anything. Within a week Wildcat Ames knew he had been the subject of discussion at the meeting of the Law and Order Committee, and it made him angry. He knew too that Deck, Landers, manager Wickly of the stage station and several others were at the rally. Some one had given him a partial list of the gathering and that made the circumstance serious. He went to Deck first.

"Look here, Deck," he said, "if you think you c'n handle that committee against me, you try it!"

Then Ames went and found Wickly who was waiting in the crowd watching the stage approaching, its dust rolling. In the hush of nervous expectancy every word was like the growl of a raw meat eater.

"Wickly," the bully said, cuffing the manager on the head, "pull for your gun—draw a knife—take a punch at me!"

Wickly was helpless. The scoundrel asked only the excuse of self defense, but the stage manager's right hand had been poisoned by a horse bite and was badly swollen. His left hand was useless in this emergency. Five or six of Ames' gang were keeping nearby, watchful for any interference, and presently, having shown his power, Ames went off down the street to drink in every saloon.

Word of what had happened reached the members of the committee within an hour or two. The fact of treachery was only too obvious. The life of not one of them all, save the traitor, was safe. Each one wondered who had done it. Suspicion might fall on an innocent man in those circumstances. By nightfall every man of the committee was creeping in the shadows, going home early in the dark.

The turn, apparently, had come. Wildcat Ames was at the top of the heap now. The lawless crowd flocked to his side, drank with him, shouted for him, followed him up and down the town as he swaggered along proud of his success in calling the bluff of the committee enforcing law and order. As if anybody had come West for these things!

In three days Buckshot was a bedlam of rioting indifference to rights of peace or business. Ames, who wanted violence, threw off his last restraint and shot down a Chinaman and the saddle horse that Wickly rode out to the pasture for the grazing stage coach haulers.

Landers boldly sent word to all the committee except Rupert Snawshall. Deck protested at this omission, but Landers retorted:

"Snawshall's a lawyer and he headed us off the last time. We'll see what he says when he hears what we're going to do."

The committee met with their rifles and revolvers. The only question was what should be done. Ames had shown his color, and it was all red. The crowd around him now precluded anything short of an actual battle if the committee went after him. But if necessary they would do that. They drew no line short of the limit now.

They couldn't surprise and hang him. In a battle he was a good shot and even if he didn't escape, his death would be no example to the town's rough men. The talk ran hither and yon; surprise, raiding his dugout and even poison for his grub were suggested.

"Somebody's got to do it, single handed," Deck suddenly expressed the general opinion. "He'd know us if we all showed up—even if five or six came together. The usual methods won't work. I'll contribute fifty dollars toward reimbursing the man who undertakes the job."

"Another fifty," Wickly added, continuing, "that's personal. For the company I'll add a hundred."

"Same here—fifty!" Landers said.

"I'm shy myself," another said, "but here's ten—"

IN FIVE minutes five hundred dollars had been subscribed in cash or dust. The gold coins and pokes were on a handkerchief on the store counter, for Landers had boldly summoned them to the Deck and Landers' store, as headquarters. And then for a time the group stood staring at the yellow reflections of the flickering greasecup lights.

"Well, boys," a mild little man, with a reddish mustache and thin hair on top his head, drawled, "if there ain't nobody else going to offer, supposin' I volunteer. You won't mind?"

"What—*you*, Lem?" Landers exclaimed.

"I reckon; no 'jections?"

"Why, certainly not!"

"I used to be pretty good at birds," Lem Ostrander said, "with a shotgun. If you'll just lend me a good —"

"Sure! Certain!" Deck hurried to the counter, under which hung a fine English double barrel gun and, handing it to Lem, he said, "It's all right, primed, twelve swan shot in each barrel, clean."

"Aw right!" Lem took the weapon, adding, "S'long, gentlemen!"

He went out the back door. Two or three started to leave the meeting.

"Hold on, boys! "Landers said. "No suspicion—no meaning at all, y'understand. But somebody reported our last meeting."

"That's so!" The three turned back promptly. "That's all right, Landers!" one continued. "I ought not to have thought of going. Ought to have known better than to start!"

"That's all right," several said, one adding, "we know you all."

So they sat there waiting. Lem Ostrander would not be betrayed by any one in the committee now. Landers blew out the lights and opened the window shutters on three sides; and the front door was unbarred and opened, all the committee easing their weapons around, ready. Their fellow member and emissary might need them. In low whispers they expressed their astonishment that Lem Ostrander, the most reliable and yet the most peaceably inclined of all—a carpenter contractor—had undertaken that deadly task. He had never fought, never drank, never killed.

Fifteen minutes whispered by in the musical night wind of the high, vibrant plateaus. The dancehall dancers were thundering to wailing, lively tunes. Shouts, the voices of coyotes, the feeling of enveloping silence oppressed the listening waiters.

Then, suddenly, *bong*—the reverberating report of a shotgun thundered in the silence. A terrible shriek of human agony, and then the shot of a revolver was followed by another deliberate, throbbing *bong!*

The men nearest the front door of the store dashed through it. The others within followed and the swifter runners streaked it along the street in the direction of the Square Bottles, whence the cry died away in a gasping wail, where the music ceased and shouts of alarm rose, women screaming, men yelling. The members of the committee dashed into the Square Bottles and stretched in an uncompromising row of muzzles front across the end of the long, rather narrow saloon and dancehall.

The throng spread back, retreating, and left lying before the bar the buckskin clad figure of Wildcat Ames, on his back, his mouth open and still gasping. Huddled down beside him was Rupert Snawshall. In Snawshall's grip was a revolver with two chambers empty. He had shot at the executioner of Ames and the second barrel had destroyed him.

"Where's — where's — " Landers demanded.

"He come in the door. Lem Ostrander pulled down an' let go!" the floor manager declared. "My Gawd, it was awful murder!"

"Not much!" Landers replied sharply. "It was fair warning for the robber friends of Wildcat Ames to leave town before the sun rises."

Then the committee backed out and returned to the big store. They found the front door open. Grease-cup candles were lighted and the shutters closed. The fitful glow revealed Lem Ostrander sitting on a bale of hides, his knees crossed and his hands clasped across one of them in a familiar, deprecatory pose. Landers handed him the kerchief of gold.

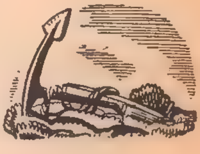
"Nope!" Ostrander refused. "I won't take blood money. If a man needs killing, we'll have to do it, course. Murdering for gold won't do. I never expected to kill any man. If it's a duty I'll do it. I'd a heap rather than sit back, being one of those that hired it, 'thout no right. Snawshall see me—drawed—so I had to double the dose. It was awful, boys!"

"You're right, Ostrander!" Landers exclaimed. "Shake!"

They all shook hands with the shaken little man.

"My sentiments, exactly!" they declared. Deck added, "Boys, we'd oughta have a lawful constituted government!"

Capstan Song



By HARRY KEMP

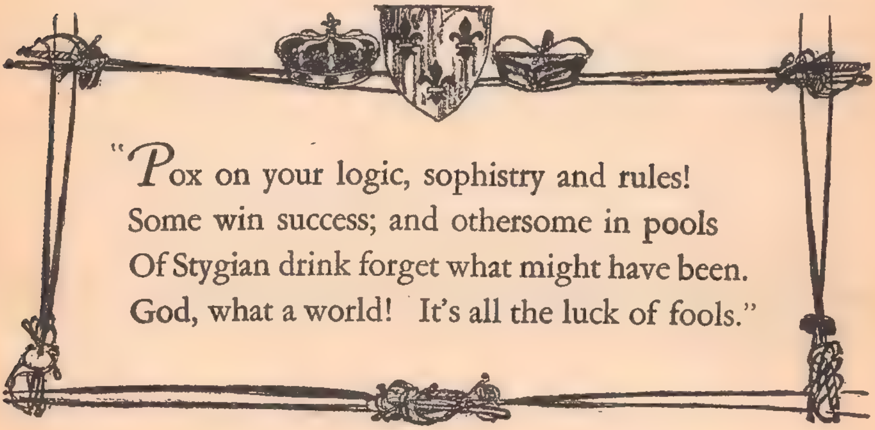
WALK and walk the capstan round,
Walk 'er steady, men;
Heave the muddy anchor up—
Walk 'er round again!

Walk and walk the capstan round;
We are off to sea—
Let the mainsail thunder out
Where the wind runs free.

Backward falls the crowded town,
Backward falls the foam. . . .
Nothing can delay a lad
When he wills to roam!

The King's Passport

By H. BEDFORD-JONES



"Pox on your logic, sophistry and rules!
Some win success; and othersome in pools
Of Stygian drink forget what might have been.
God, what a world! It's all the luck of fools."

CHAPTER I

GUARDSMEN SUP WITH A FUGITIVE

PARIS. The cold early darkness of November, 1640; new snow thinly crisp on the stones, the dark houses outlined with snow white roofs and gables, a bitter wind howling up the Seine. Three men, prince, noble and commoner, whose unguessed destiny was to bring them together within half an hour at the Pinecone Tavern.

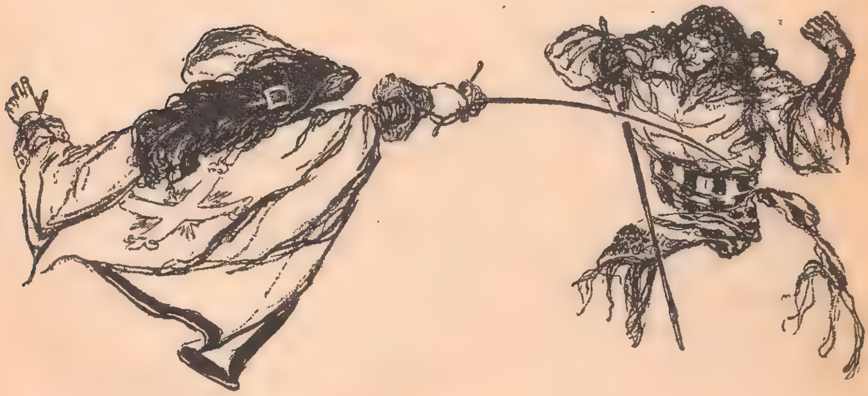
The first man. He came to the bridge of Notre Dame, pausing in shelter of the parapet, gazing across at St. Germain in shivering indecision. Desolate whiteness all around; another figure hurrying toward the bridge, turning sharply; the two collided. The man in haste snarled an oath, whipped out a dagger, lunged at the first man. They grappled, reeled, slipped in the snow and came down in a pile. Pierced through the heart by his own weapon, the assailant lay outsprawled and dead.

Above him knelt the first man, searched the body, found a fat purse and a folded vellum document, took them and rose. The snowy desolation gave tongue. The bridge held voices, bobbing yellow lanterns, archers of the *guet*—the night watch. No passing toward St. Germain!

Hat pulled down, face muffled, the first man strode rapidly and yet aimlessly. After a time he came into a narrow and tortuous street, Rue de la Juiverie. Light glimmered ahead, from thick glassed windows of a tavern whose sign of a pinecone overhung the street.

Trampled snow here, heavily marked to the tavern doorway, men lately departed. Peering in at the window, the first man saw the place empty, still faintly blue with tobacco smoke. The door swung to his hand. He crossed to the darkest corner, flung upon the table the purse and vellum document and, when the host appeared, ordered a sumptuous supper.

A Complete Novel of D'Artagnan, Cyrano De Bergerac, Cardinal Richelieu and the Glamourous Court of Louis XIII



The first man had followed his road of destiny to the place appointed.

The second man appeared close by. In shadow of the church of Ste. Magdeleine a tall figure, Gascon oaths upon his lips, guardsman's sash beneath his cloak. A companion was with him. Two figures in the dim snowy street by the church enclosure, pausing, conferring.

"*Mordieu!*" said the second man to his companion. "The spot suits you?"

"Agreed," said his companion. "Luckily, M. de Cyrano, it is your sword I must face and not your nose."

"*En garde!*" exclaimed the second man. "Brr! Too cold for long work; at the third ripost, I warn you! The third ripost, remember—"

The rasp of rapiers drawn from scabbards, the salute, the sharp click of crossed blades meeting, the sharper ring of steel against hilt.

"One!" said the second man.

His companion cursed.

"Two!" he said, bore back under furious attack, laughing harshly.

"Three!" His companion coughed and fell, pierced through the throat.

The second man knelt above him, rose with a shrug, wiped and replaced his blade. He stood listening. Clamor broke upon the night, sharp shouts, whistles. The watch? Perhaps. In any event, haste! The second man strode rapidly, with the air of knowing exactly whither he went. He came to the Pinecone Tavern, thrust open the door, looked around. Seeing the first man at a dark corner table, a dim figure, he himself picked the next darkest.

The second man had achieved the highway of his own destiny.

OUT IN the street, the third man of this fated trio. A smallish man, slender, active, naked but for a fluttering shirt, holding crimsoned sword in hand, running, cursing the half frozen filth in which his bare feet slipped. A man in frantic shivering haste. Somewhere far in his wake, a confused and riotous uproar, a clamor of voices and whistles.

Young was this third man, panting and desperate, but none the less shrewd. The glimmer of the Pinecone's windows shone ahead. He kept the trampled street center, glanced in, saw the tavern apparently empty. No stop, no pause; he ran on, made a sudden leap to a house wall where no snow lay. Then he turned, ran back to the tavern entrance. He flung open the door, stumbled in, slammed the door again. A young man, yes, young, cold, excited, yet entirely master of himself.

The host appeared, flung up both hands and stared open mouthed.

"Name of a name! Such a costume—in this weather—"

"Silence!" chattered the third man. "They're after me—don't know who I am—get me clothes, food! I'm M. d'Artagnan, cadet in the guards."

"Eh, m'sieu? You're pursued? Aye, your sword is red."

"Damnation!" cried d'Artagnan, torn betwixt cold and fury. "I was visiting a friend—jumped into the street—clothes and wine, fool! The watch is coming!"

The host of the Pinecone Tavern was used to emergencies, since under his roof gathered students and guardsmen, nobles and poets. If the greatest men in Paris sometimes came here, so did the wildest blades and also the sergeants of the watch to whom the Pinecone and its clientele were very well known.

"Come," he said, caught the arm of d'Artagnan and hurried him across the room to the doorway opening on the kitchens. They vanished together.

The third man too had come down fate's highway to the crossroads of his destiny.

In the great inn room, none too well lighted, there was momentary silence and then broke out a gust of laughter from the second man, laughter and a hearty Gascon oath.

"*Capedediousl* Here's a new fashion of visiting—ho, there, my shadowy unknown friend! Did you see the stripling in his shirt? Visiting a friend, says he, and jumped into the street! Ho-ho, that's a good one! And the friend's husband came in unexpectedly, eh? Devil take me, where's our host? If I don't get some supper before me the watch will be along and raise the devil."

The first man chuckled in his shadowed corner.

"With you or with me, monsieur? I've ordered everything in the place, so you're out of luck. Come over here and join me if you like. I want dinner on the table before the watch arrives also. What do you say?"

"*Mordieu!* With all my heart!" exclaimed the Gascon and rose.

He displayed to the curious gaze of the first man a most remarkable figure. He was tall and very long in the arm, obviously, a born swordsman, since his movements were lithe and sure footed. Also, he was young—two and twenty, at a guess.

Heavy black brows shadowed two wide set and most notable eyes, eyes that glittered and gleamed with buried fires, yet were very reckless and challenging. Not hard to imagine those eyes filled with savage glare; easier to imagine them gentle and melancholy. A man who covered his real self with a cloak of braggadocio.

Sensitive lips, criscrossed by scars, swarthy face, black mustache—and a nose! Large noses were never uncommon in Paris and to this day your born Parisian is in town slang a "big beak"; still, here was something different, noteworthy. It was not the nose of a masker, sticking straight out at the world. Instead, it was the curved, thin nostriled beak of an eagle, somewhat larger than true proportion justified, large enough indeed to catch the attention at once.

The host came into the room followed by a waiter bearing dishes. At sight of this standing figure he halted.

"Ah! You, M. Savinien!" he exclaimed in surprise. "I did not see you here."

There was a whistle blast ringing in the street.

"I'm here," said the other, striding toward the table of the first man, "and I dine with this gentleman, *Mordieu!* Down with the dinner there! Sharpen your wits, Francois! Get that naked man here with us and quick about it! The watch is in the street now—quick, man, quick!"

M. Savinien de Cyrano plumped himself into a chair as he spoke. The host wakened and made a dash for the kitchen. The waiter jumped to obey. Down came steaming capons, pewter plates and flagons, bread, knives, sauce. The first man, still a shadowy figure, slapped knife into flesh and hastily dumped portions on the plates.

"Another plate and chair!" he exclaimed. "Move sharp, man!"

The Gascon whipped about a third chair and placed it at the table while the waiter seized a plate from the rack above the hearth. An instant later d'Artagnan appeared at the kitchen door, buttoning a borrowed doublet, and crossed hastily, flinging himself into the waiting chair. A laugh broke on his lips as he eyed the two other men.

"Well, men, comrades!" he exclaimed. "I owe you thanks; at your service!"

VOICES in the street, whistles, tramping feet; the door was flung open. Into the tavern came stamping four sergeants of the watch with an officer, bringing in their wake hot oaths, cold air, the keen breath of snow.

"So!" exclaimed the officer to the host. "Here are riots and tumults in the city, M. Francois, and all roads lead to your door! We have business here, it seems."

"Not with my guests, M. de Moray," said the host sturdily. "Here are only three gentlemen of the guards."

"Precisely the three men we are searching for, eh?" The officer turned to the corner table. "Gentlemen, your pardon! I want, imprimis, a man in his shirt who has wounded a bourgeois and killed two lackeys."

The hook nosed guardsman broke into a guffaw.

"With his shirt or with his teeth, M. de Moray! We all have shirts, thanks to the saints! If your man had nothing but a shirt, he is obviously not present."

"Ah!" The officer peered at the speaker. "You, M. Savinien de Cyrano!"

"Plus de Bergerac," said the Gascon easily. "I don't like the name of de Cyrano; it's not poetical, doesn't trip in the right meter to suit me. Also, the names of Alexandre Savinien—don't they hold an Italian touch to your ear, M. de Moray? Plain Cyrano de Bergerac, now, goes much better. *Mordieu!* Don't forget the de Bergerac, my dear lieutenant!"

"I shan't forget it," said the officer of police dryly. "You're no doubt aware that duels are prohibited?"

"I should be!" Cyrano laughed. "M. de Casteljalous threatens to turn me out of his company if I have any more!"

"Some moments ago," said M. de Moray, "we came upon a gentleman of the cardinal's guards, dead. His sword was out and so was his life. He was pinked in the throat, and it appears to have been your signature, my dear M. Savinien—"

"De Bergerac," interrupted the Gascon whimsically. "De Bergerac, I beg of you!"

"And the footsteps in the snow brought us here."

"Eh?" Cyrano opened his eyes widely. "Were they my footsteps, then? Because I am here at dinner and you found footsteps in the snow. Come, my dear M. de Moray, do not be absurd, I beg of you!"

The officer bit his lip.

"Hm!" he said, staring at the shadowy figure. "Who's this other gentleman? Perhaps it was he whose footsteps also led hither! Perhaps it was he who killed M. Bernard of the cardinal's household on the Pont de Notre Dame not long since!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," returned the shadowy figure. "Are you following men or footsteps, monsieur? If you want my footsteps, you're entirely welcome. If you want me, that's another matter entirely. You have not connected me with any crime."

M. de Moray was furious at this pleasantry.

"Lanterns, here!" he ordered. "We'll see with whom we're dealing."

D'Artagnan rose. For all his youth, his late terror, he was now coolness itself.

"Needless, my dear sir, we are not hiding ourselves," he said. "I am M. d'Artagnan, cadet in the company of M. des Essarts. Do I understand, m'sieu, that you suspect me of having killed a man on the Notre Dame bridge, another gentleman in the street and of parading naked? Come! As to the last charge, you can see for yourself that I'm not naked. Of the other two matters I know nothing, upon my word of honor."

M. de Moray was far from perceiving the piercing shrewdness of this young man whose air of patent honesty and provincial simplicity cleared away the atmosphere of surcharged suspicion as by magic. The officer bowed and bit his lip.

"Perhaps we have erred," he returned. "M. Savinien I know, but you, M. d'Artagnan—"

"I have two brothers, also in the guards," said d'Artagnan quietly. "You can see for yourself, m'sieu, that the three of us have been here for some time, dining, and naturally could know nothing of what was passing outside."

The baffled officer turned to the third figure.

"And you, monsieur? Of the guards also? I do not know your face."

The shadowy form rose. He showed himself tall, gray eyed, young; the severity of his features hinted at suffering, but was lightened by the laugh in his eyes. His garments were astonishingly ragged, however; they seemed almost those of a workman.

"I arrived in Paris only today and met my friends here," he said. "In fact, I am now on my way to Jerusalem to visit the Holy Land. I have been living abroad for some time."

"In which case," suggested the officer, "you undoubtedly have a passport."

"Here it is."

"Ah! M. Nicolas Vaugon, under the signature of his Majesty in person!" exclaimed the officer, reading the document.

At these words two newcomers turned and stared at the scene, then at each other, as if in blank astonishment. M. de Moray returned the passport to Vaugon with a bow.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I regret to have disturbed your dinner and I bid you good night. Eh? Two others here?"

He crossed abruptly to the two newcomers. One of them spoke in a low voice and the officer recoiled. Then he collected himself, bowed deeply, turned, snapped an order at his men, and they all stamped out of the Pinecone.

"Paris, it would seem," said Vaugon, though his voice was shaky, "is unsafe at night."

"Devilish unsafe for the friends of his Red Eminence," said Cyrano.

D'Artagnan looked at them and smiled. His eyes were singularly piercing and alert; he had an air of keen sagacity, despite his evident youth—an air whose magnificent self confidence was impressive. Now he seemed hugely amused at something.

"Your signature, M. de Bergerac—that was neatly said!" he observed in a low voice. "Lucky he did not notice the smear of fresh blood on your baldric."

"Eh?" Cyrano started, looked down hastily and brought the edge of his cloak across his chest. "You have sharp eyes! Bah! To tell the truth, footwork in the snow was difficult, but it was a very neat thrust. Hm! I'm glad to make your acquaintance, M. d'Artagnan. You stepped into the breach nimbly. This new style you are setting of visiting friends in your shirt, it interests me!"

A flush came into d'Artagnan's face, a flash of hot anger into his eyes; then, before Cyrano's gay laugh, it died. He leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"Well, I deserved the thrust, perhaps!" he said. "M. Vaugon, I believe we both owe you thanks. Your dinner was an inspiration. You were both here when I entered, then?"

Vaugon chuckled.

"Yes. M. de Bergerac had just come in. I had preceded him by a few minutes, coming from the direction of the Pont de Notre Dame."

D'ARTAGNAN looked sharply at Vaugon, then whistled thoughtfully. Cyrano brought up his cup with a bellow of laughter.

"Good! Excellent! I drink to better acquaintance, M. Vaugon!" he cried. "Look down upon us, spirits of the illustrious dead who haunt these beams! We drink to your laughter, my dear Rabelais—how you would love this scene! We drink to your benediction, Maître Villon—how I can fancy your ghostly chuckle as you listened! To M. Vaugon's health!"

"He needs it," said d'Artagnan, setting down his cup.

Vaugon flashed a look at him.

"What mean you?"

D'Artagnan shrugged.

"If M. de Moray had looked at the remarkable red smear on the back of your passport, instead of looking at its face—"

Pallor swept into Vaugon's cheeks.

"Softly! We're not alone here," he said. "So we confess our sins? Good. I took that passport from a stranger who jostled me in passing. He drew a dagger, flew at me—and paid for it. There's the truth, gentlemen."

"Hm!" exclaimed d'Artagnan. "Dangerous truth, my friend! That stranger was M. Bernard of the household of Richelieu! You are with gentlemen, M. Vaugon; your confession is safe with us," he added simply. "At the same time, look out! By tomorrow, the cardinal's spies will be looking at every gate of Paris for that passport and its bearer!"

Now Cyrano leaned forward and spoke half seriously, half whimsically.

"*Mordieu!* We are comrades, we three. Each has saved the other this night and himself as well. But me, I am a poet, therefore curious. My friend, I have the imprudence to ask your name, since I knew very well the passport was not yours. First, I owe you a debt. Second, I am curious to know the answer."

"My name will mean nothing," said the stranger softly. "There is only one man in Paris to whom it would mean anything."

"And that man?" queried Cyrano with frank interest.

"Richelieu."

"Bah! Come, then!" Cyrano clapped his hand upon that of Vaugon. "I pledge you my friendship, if the name be that of Satan himself! Regard our lucky triangle! Here is a poet, a guardsman; there, a cadet of musketeers, and a devilish shrewd one too. And on this side—"

"A Montmorenci," said the stranger.

At this name, Cyrano started. D'Artagnan's alert gaze left the two men opposite and probed at Vaugon. Montmorenci! The great duke was dead and gone, betrayed by his allies, slain by Richelieu, to whose stern grip all the princes of France had bent and broken in exile or death.

"There are no Montmorencis," said d'Artagnan under his breath.

"There was one," said the stranger simply. "Two years ago he dwelt in England. unknown, unsuspected, with friends of his father who had kept his very existence a secret. The agents of Richelieu tracked him down, seized him by night, brought him to the Bastille. He had no friends, no money, nothing. His very name was unknown to the governor of the Bastille. He was plunged into a dungeon and forgotten, left to die in the Basiniere, the worst hell of that pile of grey stone."

These words, scarcely uttered above a whisper, held his two auditors transfixed. D'Artagnan was now keenly tense with interest, Cyrano wide eyed.

"Ah!" Cyrano's imagination plunged at the truth. "Alone, unknown, friendless, without money, rotting in the Bastille—by what miracle could this man encounter another man on the bridge of Notre Dame?"

"By using his head, and a God given chance," said the stranger, and smiled.

There was a moment of tense silence, broken by the crisp accents of d'Artagnan.

"Impossible! There has been no alarm.

My friend, what you tell us is a sacred confidence, yet impossible. In the Bastille is a marshal of France, wealthy, powerful, with great friends; but he has been there ten years. If a Bassompierre could not escape—"

"A lesser man might," said the stranger.

D'Artagnan shrugged and his eyes went back to the two cloaked men opposite. Suddenly his mouth flew open. For an instant he seemed to recoil, as if appalled by a recognition of those men, or of one only.

The others did not observe his consternation. From Cyrano broke a laugh as he pressed the hand of Vaugon and then tipped his wine cup over it.

"Good! I baptize you Nicolas Vaugon!" he said, though softly. "Being a philosopher, I believe in the impossible. We are friends. You are a man to know."

"No, I am a man to shun," dissented the other. "This lucky passport saved me tonight; tomorrow it might hang me, as our friend here has pointed out. My company is too dangerous for you. I have no name; my old one is dead with the dead past. I have no ambitions, having gained freedom. If I reached the king himself, what could I ask? Nothing. I don't want the perils of rank, I have no wealth to regain, and even his Majesty could not protect me against the cardinal."

"He can not protect himself against the cardinal," said Cyrano dryly, with all the worldly wise cynicism of twenty-one years, most of them dissipated years.

"WHEN I got free in a workman's place," went on Vaugon reflectively, "when I set foot outside the Bastille, got shorn and shaved, walked away free, I swore to myself that the past was dead, that I'd take a new name and carve out a new future. And I shall do it, if I must go to the Holy Land in the guise of this unknown Nicolas Vaugon!"

D'Artagnan took his fascinated gaze from the two strangers and looked at Vaugon with a certain admiration.

"Bah! From what I gather," he observed, "we're all in the same boat, only you're luckier than we are. Our friend here, obviously, was M. Savinien de Cyrano, and claps on a de Bergerac to make it sound better. I came to Paris a few months ago plain Charles de Batz-Castlemore and I'm now Charles de Castelmore d'Artagnan, at your service! Whereas, you have the king's warrant for your change of name, if you can keep it. But we spoke of impossibilities, my friend. Don't you know that when a prisoner escapes from the Bastille, which upon my word is rare enough, the alarm is given to all Paris?"

Even while the words were upon his lips, the thick glass of the windows shook, as the dull boom of a heavy cannon lifted over the city. There was an instant's silence and Vaugon smiled. D'Artagnan waved a hand in the air.

"Eh, then! I apologize for my lack of faith." He started slightly and leaned forward, as if remembering something. "Those two men opposite—they've recognized you, Vaugon!"

Vaugon laughed composedly and lifted his wine cup.

"There I have you! An absolute and utter impossibility, my dear M. d'Artagnan! Not Richelieu himself knows my face. Only the dull, half witted guardian of my cell has ever looked in upon me."

"I tell you, they recognize you!" snapped d'Artagnan, his voice urgent. "The man facing this way—I've seen him often enough at the Palais Cardinal. He's Mazarin, one of the secretaries of state, the Italian abbé! They're talking about you. Get out of here at once!"

"Too late," broke in Cyrano coolly. "On guard, now! M. Vaugon has saved us; we must, if necessary, save him."

He fell silent. One of the two strangers was crossing the room to their table. He halted and bowed, disclosing his features.

"Your pardon, gentlemen—ah, M. de Bergerac!"

"Good evening, my dear M. de Carbon!" returned Cyrano. "I thought you were on duty tonight?"

The other shrugged.

"I hesitate to intrude, messieurs, but

we have come here to meet a certain M. Vaugon and are somewhat pressed. May I ask whether he is of your company?"

Vaugon rose.

"That is my name, monsieur."

"Then, if these gentlemen will excuse you for a little, will you speak with us?" said the other suavely. "No doubt you comprehend the exigency of the case."

"Oh, assuredly," said Vaugon and bowed to his companions. "By your leave, gentlemen."

CHAPTER II

THE KING'S SIGNATURE

TO NICOLAS VAUGON, the brief half minute as he crossed to the other table and seated himself was stretched into a mental hour. Every faculty was on the alert; he could not comprehend the situation in the least.

He knew that Jules de Mazarin had been Guilio Mazarini, was an Italian abbé, was Richelieu's confidential secretary and right hand man and was cordially detested in Paris. Every one knew these things. The second man, he put down as an officer acting as a guard for the little Italian. Mazarin kept his face shrouded, but his eyes were sharp and brilliant, his voice soft and lisping, strongly tinged with an Italian accent.

"You are Nicolas Vaugon, mo'sou?" he asked. "May I see your passport?"

"Certainly, M. de Mazarin," said Vaugon.

The other started slightly.

"You know me?"

Vaugon gave him a glance of surprise.

"Did you not come here to meet me?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mazarin, taking the vellum. "I see Mo'sou Bernard was indiscreet."

Vaugon smiled to himself. More indiscreet than this Italian knew! But what the devil was it all about? Did it lead him back to the Bastille or ahead to safety?

"Your real name, mo'sou?" asked Mazarin, returning the passport with a nod.

"I have none. My name is here," said Vaugon at a venture, and he tapped the document.

"Admirable!" To his immense relief, Mazarin seemed much pleased by the reply. "How much, then, did Bernard tell you?"

Vaugon thought rapidly. Pitched into this affair, whatever it was, by sheer force of chance, he was at least furnished with an identity. Mazarin had entered the Pinecone too late to learn from the watch that Bernard was dead.

"M. Bernard told me almost nothing," he replied. "I met him just this side the bridge of Notre Dame. He had been seeking me vainly, was hurried and in a bad temper. He gave me the passport—"

"And the purse?" said Mazarin, anxiously.

"And the purse," echoed Vaugon.

The other sighed and made him a gesture to go on. Mazarin, who had hoarded the hugest treasure in France even while under the eagle eye of Richelieu, would far sooner lose a company or a regiment than a purse of gold pieces.

"It seems that Bernard was embroiled with some gentleman," pursued Vaugon coolly, knowing himself safe for the moment at least, "who awaited him at one side. He gave me the passport and the purse, said to hurry here and meet you, no more. I offered him my services with the other man, even gave him my sword as he had none, and he insisted that I reach here at once."

"What?" said Mazarin. "Mo'sou Bernard—you left him fighting?"

"About to fight, I think," said Vaugon.

"Well, well, he accomplished his errand; that's the main thing," said Mazarin. "So you know nothing further?"

"Nothing, except that I have borrowed the identity of a M. Vaugon—"

"Who does not exist."

Mazarin made a sign to the officer, who rose and joined Cyrano and d'Artagnan across the room. The two were left alone. Mazarin began to speak slowly, picking his words, uttering them softly and lispingly.

"I have need of a man, a gentleman, a noble. He must be unknown in Paris, unknown in the whole Ile de France,* in fact. He must be devoted to the service of his Majesty. He must obey orders without question. He must be young, a good swordsman, unmarried. Such a man is not easy to find."

"Especially one devoted to the service of his Majesty," said Vaugon, with a faint emphasis on the final words. Mazarin laughed softly, catching the point.

"Exactly. We do not seek a Cardinalist, but a man who serves his Majesty. Mo'sou Bernard knew of such a gentleman, recently arrived in Paris from Normandy—arrived only yesterday, in fact. He answered for this gentleman and undertook to bring him here to meet me. He was indiscreet to hand over the passport and purse and to use my name."

"He was pressed for time," said Vaugon dryly.

"No matter. You are the man?"

"I am Nicolas Vaugon. Everything else is forgotten," said Vaugon, "except that I serve his Majesty."

Again the slight emphasis. Mazarin tapped the table with swarthy, delicate fingers. He was the craftiest man in all Europe, this little Italian who was destined to possess the woman whom Richelieu himself loved and could never win—Anne of Austria.

"Give me the passport again."

Vaugon produced it, and the other opened, read the document aloud, in its essential snatches.

"You haven't read it carefully?

> "To all our lieutenants, generals, governors and so forth—our friend Nicolas Vaugon—going to Jerusalem—let him pass freely, safely, with his horse, money and so forth—cause him no trouble, but lend him aid and help if he has need—such is our pleasure.

"And you have his Majesty's signature. Does it not strike you, my dear Mo'sou Vaugon, that this is really an exceptional sort of document, giving you very liberal powers?"

The lisping voice drove into Vaugon. Behind the accent and lisp, behind the sleekness of it, he sensed steel.

"Undoubtedly it is," he responded. Mazarin returned the document.

"It will repay more careful reading, I think," he said. "And—

"A moment," said Vaugon coolly. "I shall be frank with you, M. Mazarin. I do not care to serve you, or his Eminence, under a borrowed name. I do not care to enter into some low intrigue of state that might hale honest if misguided men to the Bastille. I am neither for nor against his Eminence; I am solely for the King of France, whom as a noble I consider my master, and whose orders I shall obey with the utmost gladness."

Mazarin quietly took from his pocket a folded bit of vellum and handed it over. As he opened it, Vaugon saw at the bottom the same signature as that on his passport and read:

> Let this assure M. Vaugon that under this name he will be receiving commands as directly as though from my own lips; and the affair ended, he may ask of me whatever a gentleman might ask from the first gentleman of France.
>
> —LOUIS

VAUGON, giving no trace of his bewilderment, returned the letter.

"I am satisfied, monsieur," he said quietly, and then smiled.

"Good. You are to accomplish your business as you may see best—you are held responsible only for the result. At ten tomorrow morning go to the *auberge* of the Cloche, in Rue Ci-Git-le-Cœur. There a horse and equipment will be awaiting your call. Mount the horse, go to the convent of the Carmelites, ask for Madame Therese and perform the commission she will give you."

"Eh?" Vaugon looked up, astonished, as Mazarin rose. "And that's all?"

"That's all, my dear Mo'sou Vaugon. And upon my word, you will find it quite enough before it is ended! I bid you good night and the best of luck. To our next meeting!"

Mazarin flung a word at his companion, who rose and bowed, and the two men went forth into the night.

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*Paris and the country around.

VAUGON came back to the other table, sat down and attacked his scarce tasted food. He was hungry and thirsty, the crisis was past and his first duty was to the inner man. To the eager questions of Cyrano, the sharp inquiring glances of d'Artagnan, he returned his story in snatches. The host reentered, and for the moment all three gave themselves up to the business of dinner. By ones and twos, others drifted in until the old inn was noisy with tongues.

Vaugon at length handed d'Artagnan the passport, finished his report and sipped at his wine. He did not know what to make of the affair and said as much.

"However, I'm in for it," he exclaimed, with a laugh. "And why not?"

"*Mordieu!*" swore the Gascon. "My friend, you've trusted us this night!"

"Why not?" The gray eyes of Vaugon bit out at him smilingly. "We're well met."

"And well matched—*Capededious!* Well matched!" swore Cyrano delightedly, his hand smiting Vaugon's shoulder. "I got a two weeks' leave today. Shall we go together on this adventure of mystery?"

"Agreed," said Vaugon. "But remember, the bottom may fall out of things at any moment! Bernard's friend undoubtedly had a name. The man with that name is undoubtedly in Paris now. There's quite a loophole. And besides, they'll be searching for me."

"Not for Vaugon," said d'Artagnan with a short laugh. "Bah! With this paper you could travel across Europe and snap your fingers at armies, my friend! It's the most extraordinary thing I ever saw; if I didn't have it under my eyes, with his Majesty's fist to it, I'd call it a forgery! Look here, now."

All three leaned over as d'Artagnan's finger pointed to the words on which he paused.

"Here Vaugon is called a bourgeois; farther on it's Sieur Nicolas Vaugon! Death of my life, what the devil are you, a prince in disguise?"

"Certainly," broke in Cyrano. "The Montmorencis are princes; that's why Richelieu smashed their power."

"Bah! Pay attention to this," snapped d'Artagan. "Since when was a bourgeois of Paris called Sieur, eh? Ask and it shall be given to you, in the king's name! This is no ordinary formula of words! It's an absolute grant of free passage anywhere, with power to call on any officials or troops as you may need. Name of the devil, somebody's gone mad!"

And d'Artagnan threw down the document with a stupefied air. Vaugon pocketed it and nodded.

"Mazarin said it would repay another reading," he said dryly.

"It'll pay you to look to your head," said d'Artagnan, and rose. He held out a hand to each, and a smile broke on his face. "I'm off, my friends, on duty tonight. My lodgings are in the Rue des Vieux Colombiers, near the barracks of the musketeers; I shall be happy to see either or both of you at any and all times. I fear, though, that Sieur Vaugon will not come back to Paris once he's out of it."

"Bah! Why not?" said Vaugon, laughing as he shook hands. "We'll meet again, my friend."

D'Artagnan nodded and was gone. Cyrano looked after him appraisingly.

"A shrewd man, this de Batz, d'Artagnan or whatever it is! Too shrewd," he said. "Well, comrade, you'll come home with me tonight, so let's finish this bottle and our dinner, and be on our way."

Vaugnon assented. For the moment fears were banished; he was absolutely safe.

THE SINGULARITY of his situation held appalling potentiality. At ten years of age, he had been spirited out of France, supposedly dead of the plague, in reality living between Flanders and England with certain friends of the Montmorenci family who knew his secret. At twenty, he had been as mysteriously spirited back to France and into the Bastille.

Today his face was unknown to any man save his jailer. He had nothing to win back, nothing to seek; he was a man without a past. In the space of an hour's time he had seized the forelock of destiny, had been given friends, a name, a mission, a future, a king's promise!

"Eh, Richelieu did not sign that passport!" exclaimed the Gascon in a low voice. "And Mazarin meeting you here in secret, you comprehend?"

"I comprehend nothing," said Vaugon simply. "My friend, I am bewildered as a child."

Cyrano laughed.

"The king hates his minister bitterly, but fears him even more. Sly Mazarin knows that both king and minister can't live much longer; he's gambling that Richelieu dies first. You see? It's some intrigue the king is carrying along, you may be sure! You fought one of the cardinal's household tonight; tomorrow you're fighting the cardinal himself!"

"You believe that?" demanded Vaugon, frowning.

"I know it," said Cyrano with conviction. "Not you—we! And the convent of the Carmelites, eh? Great ladies, those Carmelites—noblest families in France!"

Vaugon made a gesture of caution. A man was coming to their table; he strode up, clapped Cyrano on the shoulder and leaned over.

"At your tricks again, Alexandre!"

"Tut, tut—it's de Bergerac!" said Cyrano. "How goes it, de Vausson?"

"Fairly. Come, tell me something! I hear Prieux of the guards was found tonight near the Magdaleine, run through the throat. Well, what was the rhyme? Repeat it?"

Cyrano shrugged.

"It was too cursed cold for rhyming. I warned him against the third ripost and he disregarded it. That's all."

The other chuckled and went swaggering away toward another group.

"How many names have you?" demanded Vaugon whimsically.

"I'm concentrating on one now. *Mordieu!* You take me for a Gascon?"

"Of course."

Cyrano grinned, glanced around and then spoke softly as he preened his mustache.

"Confidences! You've made yourself a pilgrim; I've made myself a Gascon! I was born here in Paris. My granddad was a fish merchant to start with and turned himself into a royal secretary and a rich man. True, we have some right to the name of de Bergerac; that is, my grandsire bought a seigneury of that name."

He chuckled. Vaugon studied him curiously.

"But why, Cyrano—why the Gascon? You don't seem a man of pretense."

"Bah! I'm a dreamer, and I like to fool these fools. Why the Gascon? Because nobody can succeed in the army unless he's a Gascon; the whole cursed countryside flocked to Paris after Henri Quatre and are here yet. Look at the guards' companies. Four out of every five are commanded by Gascons! And the ranks are almost solidly Gascon. I chose the army as a career; therefore I had to turn myself into a Gascon. And I flatter myself that I did a good job of it too."

"You did," agreed Vaugon. "But wait a minute. You fancy d'Artagnan dislikes you. Why?"

Cyrano shrugged.

"Perhaps for this very thing we've been discussing. He's a shrewd one! I'll wager you he knows well enough I'm no Gascon by birth. At any rate I could sense dislike. Well, no matter! It's a good thing I'm leaving Paris with you, as you see they all blame me for killing Prieux! Are you ready? I've no desire to be critical, my friend, but those garments of yours aren't exactly modish."

"They're two years old," said Vaugon.

"I'll fit you out. We're of a size. No protests! I won forty louis this afternoon and paid my tailor's bill; I've laid in a large wardrobe and I've a fair enough horse, and what better than to share with a comrade? Your star may lead me to fortune. Here's a last health to the unknown lady who awaits us at the Carmelites!"

He drank, and Vaugon saw on his hand the glitter of a gold seal ring incised with arms. Curious, Vaugon touched the ring.

"Come, Cyrano, more confidences! You puzzle me. Are you joking, with your talk of a fish merchant? You wouldn't carry these arms unless—"

Cyrano grimaced.

"Pretense! Folly! Mockery of fools!" he exclaimed, shoving back his chair. "Comrade, all Paris is a hollow sham, and I'm like the others. Being the man I am, I don't hesitate to admit it to myself or to a friend like you. I trust you, because you've trusted me. Noble? Bah! If the royal commissaries ever dropped on me for false assumption of nobility, they'd nail me in half an hour's time. What matter? I ruffle it with the rest, put on a bold front and laugh at the fools who are taken in. They don't laugh at me, however; they've learned it doesn't pay to laugh at Hercule Alexandre Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, by the gods! Come along before I get too drunk to find the way home."

The imitation Gascon's nimble tongue talked them out into the cold street and they went their way.

CHAPTER III

A ROYAL ERRAND

TOWARD ten the next morning Cyrano and Vaugon crossed the Bridge of Notre Dame, the guardsman mounted, Vaugon afoot, and turned their steps toward the little street to the right. The day was crisp, sunny, bracing, with flurries of snow on the stones; both men had need of their cloaks. Reaching the end of Rue Ci-Git-le-Cœur, Cyrano drew rein.

"I await you here," he said. "Two had best not come where one is expected."

Vaugon looked up at him inquiringly. Cyrano waved a hand gaily.

"That house on the left, you see? Beyond the *auberge*. I foresee pretty meetings ahead."

"Bah!" said Vaugon and with a shrug he turned up the short narrow street. The *auberge* of the Cloche showed on his left, and he turned in at the courtyard. Two grooms were saddling a splendid black horse; looking on was a man whose white plumed beaver proclaimed him a soldier. This man turned and inspected Vaugon closely and Vaugon saluted him.

"A magnificent horse, magnificent!" he said. "May I ask to whom he belongs?"

"To a gentleman, monsieur, named Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

The reply was rendered significant by the cavalier's steady gaze. Vaugon nodded.

"I am he. Do you wish to see my passport?"

"No, monsieur. Tell me merely whither you ride."

"To the Carmelites."

The other saluted him and smiled.

"Enough, M. Vaugon! I see you have no sword. Will you honor me by accepting mine? There are pistols at the saddle, yet one finds a sword handy."

Vaugon bowed. The other removed a very handsome baldric and sword, handed it to him, then turned and disappeared in the *auberge* without awaiting thanks. Vaugon donned the baldric, fastened up his cloak, mounted and headed the black out into the street. When he regained the quay and his companion, Cyrano regarded him amusedly.

"Horse, pistols, a sword! Excellent. At the Carmelites a lady awaits us. Better still! I knew this would be interesting. Forward to the Barrier St. Jacques!"

"I've thought of something," said Vaugon. "Your theory of last night, remember? If it were correct, then why should M. Bernard of the cardinal's household have taken the passport and money to Vaugon?"

Cyrano shrugged.

"Why did he attack you so hastily? He thought you were spying upon him."

Vaugon did not reply for a moment and Cyrano regarded him half curiously, half in admiration. In repose, this gray eyed face, older than its years, bore a certain inflexible severity and steely determination; one does not lie in prison two years with one single fixed purpose in mind and not show the traces. Yet in laughing relaxation that same face was swept back into something of the Gascon's reckless youth, with a merry, level eyed smile that could be winning enough.

Passing Port Royal and the fields beyond, they came to the barrier of the Faubourg St. Jacques, where the massive walls and buildings of several monasteries and convents rose gray ahead. One of the guards halted them at the gate.

"Service of the king," said Vaugon. "Call your officer."

The officer came from the guardhouse, opened the passport Vaugon extended and doffed his beaver respectfully.

"Pass, service of the king!" he exclaimed.

To the salute of the guards, the two men rode on into the Rue de St. Jacques. As they came to the corner of the Rue d'Enfer a man on horseback pushed out ahead of them, hand on sword, barring the way.

"Ah!" said Cyrano, drawing ahead of Vaugon. "Good morning, my worthy commander!" he exclaimed gaily. "I left you yesterday at the Louvre; I find you today in St. Jacques. Come, has some magician enchanted an honest Gascon—one moment a captain of the guards, the next keeping a lonely watch in a street of suburban friars?"

At this gay appeal the other put forth his hand. He was no other than Carbon de Casteljaloux, in whose company Cyrano served, a keen eyed, stalwart, swarthy man.

"You, M. Savinien!" he exclaimed, with a sharp look at Vaugon. "I thought you on leave."

"Precisely," said Cyrano. "On his majesty's business, my dear Captain. Do I understand you are halting us?"

"I am," said the other dryly. "This is no place for a duel, let me warn you. Her Majesty, the queen, is in retreat at the Carmelites since yesterday. I am personally in charge of—"

"Good, good! We go to the Carmelites," said Cyrano. "Show your passport, M. Vaugon!"

The captain stared.

"*Cadédis!* Are you jesting, my good Savinien?"

Cyrano took the passport from Vaugon.

"I jest with this, my good Casteljaloux!"

The other saluted stiffly.

"Good. Pass. Go to the devil if you like! That is to say, go to the postern gate in the Rue de la Bourbe. The main entrance is under guard of M. de Vaugiron of the cardinal's guards, and I know you too well to give you passage thither."

"Thanks," said Cyrano. "We accept your advice with pleasure."

"One moment!" said the captain. "In regard to a gentleman found dead near the Magdaleine last night and another gentleman found on the Pont de Notre Dame—"

"Too late, my dear Captain," said Cyrano, smiling. "M. de Moray did me the honor of questioning me last night and appeared quite satisfied that I had nothing to do with either unhappy demise."

"Go to the devil!" growled his commander, but chuckled as he drew aside, returning the salute of Vaugon.

THE TWO rode on, Cyrano leading the way down the Rue d'Enfer, where high garden walls rose on either hand. They turned into the Rue de la Bourbe and midway of these walls saw a small gate, surmounted by a cross, outside which a musketeer stood on guard. Cyrano swung from the saddle and knocked, then turned to the bell pull, tugged it and nodded to the guard.

"Will you watch our horses, comrade? Good. Here we are, Vaugon!"

The little port in the gate was opened and a nun's face looked through the grill.

"Sieur Nicolas Vaugon," said Cyrano. "To see Madame Therese by appointment."

The gate was opened in silence. The two men stepped in and found themselves in the snow touched gardens of the convent. Their silent guide beckoned, and they followed across the bleak garden to the building at the right, through a doorway into an austere hall. Their guide opened a door to the left, showing a reception room anything but gay.

"Wait," she said, and departed.

Cyrano made a gesture and went to the window, staring out on the garden.

"Come here," he said suddenly; Vaugon strode to his side and looked out. "Do you know that man?"

"No. Who is he?"

From another door in the building opposite theirs a man was leisurely crossing the garden toward the gate, fastening a furred mantle as he went. He was richly dressed in blue velvet, pointed with gold; a blue plume adorned his beaver, and his cloak was of blue also. Riding boots and gauntlets betokened the traveler. Cyrano watched him with a shadowy frown darkening his face, then turned.

"Comte de Fleurey, a relative of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon, who happens to be the niece of the red cardinal. De Fleury is an ambitious young man, a confidant of his Eminence, a soldier of distinction."

"Whom you do not love, by the tone of your praise?" Vaugon laughed.

Cyrano shrugged lightly.

"Each one to his taste, my friend! He's handsome, popular, able, sure to get on in the world. I'm envious."

"You? Envious?" Vaugon clapped him on the shoulder. "Bah! When you're envious the sun will spill rain, eh? What's the matter?"

The Gascon's jaw had dropped, his eyes widening in blank amaze. He put out a hand and pushed Vaugon away; such utter stupefaction was imprinted on his face that Vaugon turned, followed his gaze and saw that a woman had entered the room and was coming toward them. She was plainly dressed, in middle age, yet very beautiful.

An incredible suspicion seized upon Vaugon. It was confirmed when Cyrano took a step forward, dropped to his knee and kissed the hand that Anne of Austria held to him.

"Your Majesty!" stammered the Gascon, for once utterly at a loss.

"You are M. Vaugon?" asked the queen.

"I am M. de Bergerac of the guards, your Majesty. My companion is Sieur Vaugon."

Vaugon came to his knee, touched his lips to the queen's fingers and looked up to see a startled hesitation in her eyes. He divined its cause and spoke.

"Your Majesty, I am Nicolas Vaugon. I know little of the world of Paris; but I am fortunate in a friend who is a better man than I. When he offered to accompany me in this unknown errand, I accepted with joy. Since he asks only to serve your Majesty, should you wish him to retire—"

"Ah, no, no!" said the queen swiftly, and smiled a little. "I have heard of M. de Bergerac and I know that I have no more devoted servant. You did not know you were to see me?"

"I undertook this errand in the service of the king," said Vaugon.

He smiled and, meeting his quick gray eyes, his warm smile, the queen's hesitancy fled.

"Your name, monsieur?"

"I have none other than that on my passport, your Majesty. It has been given me by the king; I shall therefore keep it and it alone."

She laughed suddenly at this.

"Courtier! But no, you speak in earnest. Are there such men then? Well, time presses. You know of your errand?"

"I know only that I was to come here at this hour, ask for Madame Therese and do what she told me to do. Nothing else, your Majesty."

The queen's eyes widened slightly, searched his face, read truth there and relaxed.

"Do you know the country south of Paris, the Forest of Esugny?"

"No, your Majesty."

"One follows the Orleans road to Lonjumeau, from there the paved road to

Ste. Genevieve des Bois, a matter of six to seven leagues. Half a league from Ste. Genevieve, on the forested heights above the Orge, is the Château de Closset, property of Mademoiselle de Closset, ward of the king. Can you find the place?

Vaugon assented silently, and Cyrano made a gesture of assurance.

"What day is this—Thursday? On Saturday Mlle. de Closset enters into contract of marriage with a gentleman. She does not wish it. I do not wish it. The king himself does not wish it. Yet, for certain reasons of state, or rather of policy—"

The queen bit her lip; she had nearly said too much, for a slight flush of anger had mounted in her white cheeks. Vaugon could finish her sentence easily enough; what any one else in France did or did not wish, mattered nothing, if Richelieu wished it.

"Your Majesty desires this marriage prevented?" asked Vaugon quietly.

"The king has promised Mlle. de Closset that it shall be prevented."

Vaugon bowed.

"Then it shall inevitably be prevented, and in the simplest of ways. If your Majesty will confide to me the name of the gentleman about to be honored."

"Stop!" exclaimed the queen imperiously. "We ask your service, monsieur, not your plans. The plans are already made; you were given this passport for a purpose, and that purpose is to take Mlle. de Closset away with you."

"To the Holy Land, your Majesty?" and Vaugon smiled.

"Where you like. She expects you, and you will show her this in token." Into Vaugon's hand the queen dropped a small, heavy object, which he pocketed at once. "The way, the means, the road—these are for you to say, as she will be in your charge. Sieur Nicolas Vaugon is presumed to have certain qualities which will place him, in respect to this lady, in the position of his Majesty himself."

It was graciously said and Vaugon bowed.

"Your Majesty shall not be disappointed. May I point out that evasion is one thing; the prevention of the marriage quite another thing."

"Evasion is prevention; time fights for us," said the queen, a flash in her eye. She was fighting the red cardinal with his own weapons now. "After the fifteenth of December you may bring Mlle. de Closset openly to the Louvre, but not until that date."

"On the sixteenth of December, your Majesty, we shall come to the Louvre."

"I can give you no reward, M. Vaugon, except my thanks."

The queen extended her hand. Vaugon went to his knee as he touched her fingers to his lips.

"It is reward enough to serve your Majesty," he said quietly.

The queen smiled, gave her hand to Cyrano, departed. The silent nun appeared and beckoned, led them out and across the garden to the gate.

AS VAUGON was mounting, Cyrano paused for a word with the guard.

"*Mon ami*, some ten minutes a very fine gentleman came out this way. I perceive you belong to the company of Treville; hence you may be aware that, while the gentleman was garbed outwardly in blue, he might have better been dressed in red."

The guard, a Gascon like most of his company, caught the allusion and grinned.

"You're a good Cardinalist, M. de Bergerac!" he returned. "Your friend was met by two other men, with horses. They spoke of taking the Orleans road."

"Thanks, comrade," said Cyrano and he climbed into the saddle.

For a space the two companions rode on in silence, Cyrano leading the way for the Barrier d'Enfer and the highway leading south to Orleans. Then the pseudo-Gascon broke silence.

"Save the horses—a splendid animal, that of yours!" he said. "Eh, comrade?"

Vaugon nodded.

"I told you there was a future to be won! If we can carry off this lady and keep her safe for two weeks or so—"

"*Mordieu!* We must take her to the moon, then! Every Cardinalist spy in France will be out for us. And what the devil to do with a woman on the highway during a fortnight? And where will we go with her?"

"Where we like. That is, providing we live. If she's a fine court lady, Cyrano, we'll have a job on our hands. We'll have to get a coach for her."

Cyrano came stirrup to stirrup and leaned over.

"Out with it! She slipped something into your hand. What was it?"

Vaugon smiled, and held out his hand. On its little finger glittered a ring of plain gold; in it was carved the letter M and nothing else. Cyrano examined it, then straightened up and whistled softly.

"Marie de Chevreuse!" he ejaculated. "But softly, now—the barrier—"

In five minutes they were past the gate and on the route of the south. Then Cyrano uttered a joyous laugh.

"All clear except one thing!" he exclaimed. "Look, now! Richelieu and Chevreuse are bitter enemies; this girl is a relative of Chevreuse and the king's ward. Richelieu determines to marry her—to whom? There's the hidden thing, with its odd time element. He forces the king to agree, Chevreuse somehow gets word to the queen; for once, she joins forces with the king against Richelieu. What happens?

"They work with Giulio Mazarini—ha! The Italian's too sharp for Richelieu. He never uses force, that Italian; he has a head! M. Bernard is drawn in to supply the man needed. He, too, betrays Richelieu. Fate sends the man, you see? Perhaps Cinq Mars is in it somewhere. Since Richelieu installed him as grand equerry, he's become the king's favorite and has turned against Richelieu also. Well, no telling! The king signs this passport, and the game of destiny is set in motion. Result, you wear a ring Mlle. de Closset will recognize!"

Vaugon looked sharply at his companion.

"You mean it's an excuse for a conspiracy to crush Richelieu?"

"Crush Richelieu? *Mordieu!*" Cyrano slapped his thigh delightedly. "While that man has breath in his body, all France can't crush him! No, it's a conspiracy to betray him. Well, let them look out! The old lion has claws. I hate Cardinalists, but I admire the cardinal. He's the best man in France today, bar none!"

Vaugon shrugged.

"After two years in the Bastille, I can't share your sentiments of admiration. Besides, why should Count de Fleurey, in all his court finery, be taking the Orleans road?"

"Ha!" Cyrano nodded. His dark eyes gleamed and he fingered his mustache with an air of anticipation. "Exactly! And why should he be at the Carmelites, eh? Spies! There's our man, Vaugon! There's our bridegroom! Spurs, and after him!"

The horses quickened their pace, broke into a gallop, went thundering down the hard cold wintry road toward the south.

CHAPTER IV

RICHELIEU'S COMMISSION

ON THE evening of the same day that Vaugon and Cyrano quit Paris, it appeared that a number of people had business in the Rue Vaugirard, beside the gardens of the Luxembourg. A rather astonishing fact, since in this section of Paris was nothing to draw any one; this quarter of palaces, of monasteries, of hotels belonging to great nobles, was tonight dark and silent.

Yet people came into the Rue Vaugirard, the narrow little street beside the Luxembourg, and others went. Folk of all classes, it seemed; soldiers, tradesmen, bravos, even a woman or two, lackeys, monks. The really odd thing about it was that they all came and went by a small unlighted door in an unlighted house. The door, however, gave entry into a central courtyard where a lantern showed an officer and guards.

This house was the Hotel d'Aiguillon,

belonging to Mme. de Combalet, Duchesse d'Aiguillon, the niece of Richelieu.

A man in black, looking as if he might be the lay brother of some religious order, came into the courtyard, passed the guards to the entry beyond and gave his name to a lackey at a door there. He paid no heed to the assembly in the reception room, but waited with head bowed until the lackey returned and gestured. He followed to a room on the floor above, where sat at a desk a gray clad man, sharp featured, cold eyed, with grayish hair and goatee. This man was Léon de Bouthilier de Chavigny, secretary of state.

The man in black came forward humbly and stood waiting until he was addressed.

"Your report?" said Chavigny, with his usual icy air.

"Excellency, two visitors today. They came about ten o'clock this morning, evidently by appointment. They asked at the gate for Mme. Therese and were taken into the convent at once."

Chavigny laid down his pen.

"Ah! Their names?"

"One was a M. de Bergerac, of the company of Casteljaloux. The other, a stranger."

"His name?"

"Vaugon."

"A soldier?"

"No, Excellency. A young man, very grave, handsome, even distinguished. He was not of the court."

"By which gate did he enter?"

"The small postern in the Rue de la Baude."

"Good. Continue."

"He remained for perhaps fifteen minutes. I learned that a certain person saw him in private. He departed with his companion, clad as if for a journey; they had excellent horses and rode toward the Barrier d'Enfer."

"Very well. Nothing else?"

"The report as to—a certain person—for the day."

The spy laid a paper on the desk. At a gesture from Chavigny he withdrew. Chavigny touched a bell before him and a secretary entered.

"The officer who was on duty this morning at the Barrier d'Enfer. Bring him within half an hour."

THE SECRETARY bowed and withdrew. Chavigny glanced at the written report and tossed it aside, frowning. He looked up as another man entered.

"Ah! Good evening, M. de Moray! What developments in the cases of M. Prieux and Bernard?"

"I regret to say, none," said M. de Moray. "My police—"

"It is of you I ask, not of your police," said Chavigny with glacial air.

The officer changed countenance.

"M. Bernard was killed by a thrust from his own dagger," he responded. "The snow was fresh; we traced footprints as far as Ste. Magdaleine, where they became lost. There we found M. Prieux, sword in hand; obviously, a duel. It seemed that footsteps led to the Pinecone Tavern; we could not be certain. Also, there was a riot in the Rue d'Anvers. A man visiting his mistress was surprised by the husband, fled with sword and shirt alone, killed two lackeys and escaped. His tracks also led toward the Pinecone but were lost among others in the street."

"His name?" demanded Chavigny.

"Unknown. The woman knew him as Comte de Silly. No such person exists."

"And at the Pinecone there were no developments?"

M. de Moray shrugged.

"In the *auberge* were only three gentlemen at dinner; none was the naked man of the Rue d'Anvers. One was a gentleman of the guards, M. Savinien de Cyrano—"

"The most confirmed duelist in Paris!" said Chavigny.

"He laughed at my questions." Moray flushed slightly. "Another was a cadet of the guards, one M. d'Artagnan, a young man, but conveying a remarkable impression. He denied all knowledge—"

"The third!" broke in Chavigny. "Who was the third?"

"A stranger, one Sieur Vaugon."

Chavigny started.

"Vaugon, you say? A stranger? You're certain?"

"Bearer of a passport signed by his Majesty—a most unusual thing, as you know," said Moray stiffly.

At this instant a small, dark clad man entered the room without a sound, advanced to the desk and laid down some papers. Chavigny gave him a glance and a nod.

"In a moment, M. de Mazarin. Continue, M. de Moray. This Sieur Vaugon?"

"The passport was most emphatic," said Moray. "He was to be offered no hindrance, but to be given every aid he might demand. Before such sweeping orders—"

"You were helpless, naturally. There was no one else in the place?"

The dark eyes of Mazarin rested upon the officer with singular intensity, and M. de Moray caught the look.

"There was no one else," he said.

"Very well, thank you. We shall look into it."

The officer bowed and withdrew.

CHAVIGNY turned to his other visitor.

"Well, M. de Mazarin?"

"Monsieur—" Mazarin bowed with deference—"his Eminence requests that you bring him the report from Sedan as quickly as it arrives."

"In ten minutes at latest. It but just arrived and is being decoded now."

Mazarin withdrew. Chavigny touched his bell and gave his secretary swift orders.

"A special passport was issued some time since to one Sieur Vaugon. Send to the clerks of the seals tomorrow morning and demand why no report was made of it. I wish to speak as quickly as possible with a cadet of the guards, a M. d'Artignan or d'Artagnan—"

"I think he is on duty tonight, here," said the secretary.

In five minutes d'Artagnan entered the room. He had donned the magnificent scarf of blue and silver, the only vestige of a regular uniform yet known in the guards; and while he lacked the cassock or cloak of a guardsman, he was proud enough of the uniform scarf.

"Monsieur," said Chavigny without preamble, "I believe you dined at the Pinecone last evening with a certain M. Vaugon. Will you kindly tell me what you know of him?"

"With pleasure, monsieur," said d'Artagnan coolly.

If the gaze of Chavigny were icy, his own was poised and penetrating, unruffled.

"When I entered the tavern, M. de Bergerac of the guards was there. He asked me to dine with him. A certain Sieur Vaugon was also his guest, so I met the gentleman for the first time in this way."

"Who is he? Where is he from?"

"Unless the information is offered, monsieur, one gentleman does not ask these things of another."

It was sweetly said. Chavigny bit his lip and a trace of color rose in his cheek.

"Then this Vaugon was a stranger to you?"

"A perfect stranger, monsieur."

FROM outside the curtained doorway, a shadow moved swiftly; it developed into the noiseless figure of Mazarin, slipping rapidly down a corridor. The wily Italian realized that unless he got ahead of Chavigny, whom he hated and feared, there would be questions to answer. He much preferred to make Chavigny do the answering.

He penetrated to a large room whose curtained windows overlooked the gardens of the Luxembourg. This room was dark, lighted only by the blazing fireplace and a pair of candelabra upon a table heaped with papers. Writing at the the table, sat a man in a vast pillow heaped armchair, a man wrapped against the cold in a furred mantle. Upon his head was a tiny scarlet skullcap. His hair was thin and gray. His high forehead, his imperious features, were drawn as though with slow, unending pain; yet above the pain was stamped in them the sigil of an inflexible will. Gray mustache and chin tuft enclosed thin, bitter lips which seemed incapable of smiling.

"Not arrived?" asked Richelieu, glancing up at Mazarin's entry.

"Not yet, Monseigneur," lisped Mazarin. "But I have just been given a very curious report, which you might find of interest."

Richelieu laid aside his quill and leaned back among his cushions, with a gesture of assent. Mazarin spoke softly, slowly.

"A fortnight ago, Eminentissime Signor, a document was taken to the clerks of the seals by M. le Grand in person. This document was a passport, made out by M. le Grand, and signed by his Majesty, in the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon, a gentleman of Paris. No such person exists. It seems M. Vaugon was granted rather exceptional powers in order that he might make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land."

Richelieu looked faintly amused.

"Yes? Your information comes from—"

"A lady," said Mazarin, with a modest smirk. "The point is, Monseigneur, that one could very well go to Jerusalem by way of London, Madrid, or—Sedan."

At this word, it seemed as if a flash of lightning filled the eyes of Richelieu. He relaxed, thoughtful, silent. Mazarin said nothing more, but waited.

"Cinq Mars dares to send messages, you think?" murmured Richelieu aloud. "Then he has joined hands with them. They would join hands with Spain if they could. Ah, Marie, you are never long quiet! Always treachery from within—always!"

"This Vaugon," broke in the lisping Italian voice, "left Paris today with a companion. Doubtless M. de Chavigny will have news of him."

Richelieu nodded thoughtfully. Had he glanced up, he might have seen something like a flash of malignant triumph in the shaded eyes of Mazarin, but it was gone instantly.

"This M. le Grand grows too great, poor little Cinq Mars, to feel himself so high!" said Richelieu in contempt. "There should have been a report from London today, M. de Mazarin. It has not arrived?"

"I have just decoded it, your Eminence."

Mazarin laid down a paper. Richelieu glanced at it. His countenance changed. With an exclamation he sat up sharply.

"Chevreuse—disappeared! Why didn't you give me this before—"

"Perhaps there is a connection, your Eminence," suggested Mazarin smoothly. "If she has disappeared, then she has reached Flanders and Spanish help. If she has reached Flanders, then—"

"Yes, yes! This messenger from Cinq Mars, you mean? This Vaugon? It's possible." Richelieu frowned. "Let it wait. I'll have to think it over. By the way, what of this escape from the Bastille yesterday? I asked M. du Tremblay to report to me personally."

"He is waiting now, Monseigneur."

"Good. Bring him in."

STILL bruskly startled by the news from London, Richelieu looked up almost savagely as Mazarin ushered into the room a gentleman of fifty years whose usually jovial air was now very disconcerted. The governor of the Bastille bowed as he advanced.

"Well, monsieur, this is sad news I hear of you," said Richelieu coldly. "It seems you have permitted a prisoner to escape; above all, a prisoner of importance. Is the Bastille, then, at fault?"

"It is I who am at fault, your Eminence," said Tremblay firmly.

"Expound the fault."

"Two years ago this prisoner was committed under a *lettre de cachet*, accompanied by strict and explicit orders. He was inscribed on my register as Monsieur Personne— Nobody. He was placed in the Basinière in solitary confinement, was seen only by his jailer, was allowed one hour of liberty only after dark. As I was ordered, your Eminence, I forgot his existence. I forgot it so completely that when, a week ago, it became necessary to repair the walls of the Basinière, I still forgot it. This prisoner overpowered a workman, left him in the cell and departed in his place."

"You've taken measures to find him again?"

M. du Tremblay threw out his hands.

"His name is unknown. His face is unknown, for I find that a man of his description was shaved by the barber outside the gates last evening. Your Eminence, can I trace such a person? Only his jailer has seen his face, and the man can give no intelligent description of his prisoner."

Richelieu's icy sternness was melted by the complete avowal.

"M. du Tremblay, I ordered you to forget your prisoner, it is true, but not to forget his existence. Do not obey your orders too well, in future."

Dismissed by a gesture, delighted at getting off so easily, the governor of the Bastille made haste to depart. At the doorway appeared Chavigny.

"The report from Sedan, your Eminence."

"Good. Remain, M. de Mazarin, if you please."

Mazarin withdrew into the shadows beside the fireplace. Chavigny advanced and gave Richelieu a document, which the cardinal opened and read.

RICHELIEU looked up, laid aside the paper.

"Nothing new, then?"

"Nothing, your Eminence. I have not seen the report from London. That of four days ago showed Chevreuse trying feverishly to borrow money, writing, appealing. She is helpless."

"On the contrary," said Richelieu dryly, "she has fled secretly from London to Flanders. She is either seducing the Spaniards at this moment, or in France, for all I know!"

Chavigny started, and a sly malicious smile touched Mazarin's lips.

"Ah, that's bad news, Monseigneur! But I have another matter to lay before you. This morning a gentleman called at the convent of the Carmelites, asked for Madame Therese and was given an audience of fifteen minutes by her Majesty in person. He departed with a companion and at the Barrier d'Enfer took the Orleans road."

Now indeed the flash in Richelieu's eye was not to be mistaken. His voice leaped out with imperious command.

"Who was this gentleman?"

"A man whose passport bore the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon. This passport—"

"Vaugon!" said Richelieu. "The passport sealed for M. le Grand!"

"Your Eminence knows of it?" exclaimed the startled Chavigny.

"Yes, yes. Wait a moment, now."

Mazarin, in the shadows, smiled again at the disconcerted air of Chavigny.

"Chevreuse has left London; only the devil knows where she is now! You see, Chavigny? Here's her hand at work. Cinq Mars sending a messenger. Whither? Not to Jerusalem, that's certain! To Sedan, beyond a doubt. Chavigny, who is this Vaugon? His description?"

"A stranger." Chavigny gave what description he had gained. "The horse he rode was from the royal stables."

"Furnished by the Grand equerry—M. Cinq Mars! Good. Such a horse, such a man, can not escape notice."

"He had a companion," added Chavigny, "a M. de Bergerac of the guards, on leave."

"Send out men—a dozen parties, a hundred if necessary! Not to follow, but to head off this messenger. Let them ride east, and work back around Paris, covering every possible route. Vaugon rode south, meaning to circle around and so gain Sedan. You understand? Quickly!"

Chavigny bowed and departed. Mazarin came forward with deference.

"M. de Chavigny," he lisped, "has forgotten something, or perhaps does not know it. Last evening this M. Vaugon and his companion dined at the Pinecone tavern with a third person, a young cadet of guards by the name of d'Artagnan. He is the youngest of three brothers in the corps, I believe, and a swordsman; you may recall the affair of a Swiss officer who was killed near the Pont Neuf."

"Why is this man worth a hundred others?" demanded Richelieu, frowning.

"Because he alone knows the face of Sieur Vaugon. He is on duty here to-night."

Richelieu nodded slowly.

"Very well. Suppose you send for him."

"You recall the description of this Vaugon, Monseigneur? Young, smooth faced, blond! An unknown name. A stranger. An interview, a private one, with her Majesty—"

The cardinal started.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed sharply, with a movement as if to leap from his chair. His austere features contracted. "Chevreuse? She would not dare! In such a disguise—"

"It has served her before, your Eminence," said Mazarin gently. "True, she is no longer young; therefore she is the bolder. As for daring, is there anything she would not dare?"

"True, true!" Richelieu's eyes were smoldering now. "Ah, Marie, if you've ventured into my hand now—that man! Swiftly!"

Mazarin, foreseeing the imperative word, had called a secretary.

D'ARTAGNAN, summoned from the courtyard below for the second time, entered the room and bowed. His rapid gaze touched on Mazarin, standing just behind the cardinal.

"Approach, M. d'Artagnan," said Richelieu paternally. "I believe you have made your first campaign this summer at the siege of Arras?"

"I had that honor, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan, so stressing the words that the empty formula took on its full worth.

Richelieu studied him a moment, struck by his air of youthful eagerness, which yet masked perfect coolness. Then, with a slight sigh, the red minister leaned forward and opened one of many drawers in his desk. He produced a dossier of papers and selected one.

"Yes, yes," he murmured. "Undoubtedly this is the man."

He studied the paper. D'Artagnan's gaze shifted suddenly to Mazarin, who made a slight gesture of reassurance. Richelieu looked up, frowning, menacing.

"M. d'Artagnan—" his voice was penetrating—"an affair was some days ago brought to my notice regarding a Swiss gentleman, found last Monday by the archers of the Chatelet with a sword thrust in his heart. What do you know of it?"

Perceiving that the whole affair was there under Richelieu's eyes, d'Artagnan assumed a reflective air.

"I did hear something of it, your Eminence. If I might speak plainly—"

"By all means," said Richelieu.

"It came to my ears that the man in question maligned you as a foul traitor to France and to his Majesty," said d'Artagnan bluntly, and his words fell on the silence like a bomb. "I presume, Monseigneur, that some one took the fellow to account."

"Eh?" Richelieu was genuinely astonished. "Maligned me—as a traitor? The gentlemen of your corps, monsieur, are not noted for their attachment to the royal ministers. Do you mean to affirm that you, for example, would draw sword on such a flimsy pretext?"

"The noblest pretext in the world, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan firmly. "I am a gentleman, and I serve the king, my master. If any man cast so vile a slander upon any one of my comrades, it would be my duty as a gentleman to resent it to the uttermost."

At this speech a tinge of color crept into the pale cheeks of the cardinal.

"Ah, M. d'Artagnan, you disarm me!" he said simply and pushed away the dossier. "And more, you honor me. Let us come to plain speech then, as between comrades. Last night, I think, you dined with a certain M. Vaugon."

Mazarin made a gesture of assent, at the same time frowning slightly.

"Not so, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan. "I went to the Pinecone to sup. A fellow guardsman was there, M. de Bergerac of the company Casteljaloux. He invited me to join him and I accepted. This Sieur Vaugon was with him."

Mazarin looked his approval.

"Then you had not met Vaugon previously?"

"He was a total stranger to me and, I think, to M. de Bergerac also."

"You would know him if you saw him again?"

"Most assuredly."

"Did you learn anything about him?"

Mazarin gestured caution, but had no need.

"Very little, Monseigneur. While we were dining, M. de Moray and his men entered in search of some one who was not there. This M. Vaugon was questioned and produced a passport which apparently satisfied M. de Moray. I left shortly afterward."

"Hm! Recalling the man to mind," asked Richelieu, "would it appear possible to you that he might have been a woman wearing man's clothes?"

To his astonishment d'Artagnan caught a sign of assent from the abbé.

"Possible, yes, but improbable, your Eminence. His oaths, his manner of loose talk would have done credit to the late M. de Brantome himself."

Richelieu almost smiled.

"So would the tongue of the woman I believe him to be. M. d'Artagnan, you are a cadet, therefore ambitious; a Gascon, therefore shrewd. Prove your ability, and your guardsman's cassock awaits you."

D'Artagnan bowed silently.

"You," pursued the cardinal, "appear to be the only person who knows this Sieur Vaugon by sight. I believe him to be a most treasonable person. He left Paris this morning by the Orleans road in company with M. de Bergerac. I believe he means to go south, then circle around the environs of Paris, perhaps from Berny and so make for Sedan. I have sent out men to head him off; I send you to follow and overtake him. M. Mazarin, write an order for two of the best horses in my stables to be selected by M. d'Artagnan and give me the purse on the small table."

With a sigh, Mazarin handed him the purse, then leaned over the table to write the order.

"Follow this Vaugon." Richelieu extended the purse to d'Artagnan. "Overtake him, join company with him, discover whom he meets and what he does."

D'Artagnan stiffened slightly.

"Monseigneur, I am a soldier," he said simply.

"You'll arrest that man and bring him to me!" snapped the minister. "Good. I absolve you from any duty of a spy."

The young man bowed.

"Very well. I am to leave at once?"

"By all means. At once—tonight! Do nothing in a hurry, once you've joined Vaugon," went on the minister thoughtfully. "It's extremely probable, now that I think of it, that he will deliver letters to others, or receive them *en route:* in such case, seize the letters and the messengers. Vaugon may not turn for Sedan at once. Give him rein. When, in your judgment, he is headed for Sedan, then arrest him, persuade him, do what the devil you like, but bring him here to me in person. Do you comprehend?"

"Perfectly, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan. "I am to go alone?"

"Yes. We need shrewd wits, not force. You are to seize any documents possible and, in order to get hold of them, take your time with the man." Richelieu signed the order for horses and shook sand over it. "Pick what horses you like. Speed is essential if you are to catch up with him."

"I am to arrest him in your name, Monseigneur?"

At those guileless words Richelieu smiled grimly.

"Ah, Gascon!" he said. "You are an officer of the king. When the time for arrest comes, you are to act in the name of the king. Your uniform is your commission."

D'Artagnan bowed.

"And his companion, M. de Bergerac?"

Richelieu made an impatient gesture.

"Bah! He's nothing. It's the other I want at all costs—at all costs, you understand?" he added, with that terrible flash in his eye which showed his bitter and inflexible spirit. "Use your own time, your own weapons, your own discretion, but do not return without bringing M. Vaugon!"

"I shall return with him, your Eminence."

"And he is not to be harmed. That is all."

D'Artagnan bowed and departed. Richelieu sank wearily back into his chair.

"I have her, Mazarin. I have Chevreuse in my hands at last!" A deep breath escaped his tortured body. "Well, a good night's work here. Let's turn to other things. The marriage of M. de Fleurey with Mlle. de Closset is arranged?"

"Fully, Monseigneur," lisped Mazarin. "M. de Fleurey left this morning to pay his respects to the lady, remaining at the château until the contract is signed."

"Good. Ah, my excellent Mazarin, if you were not an abbé what a match I might reward you with, you also!"

A sardonic gleam flickered in the secretary's eye, as if to say that he might some day reward himself with a better match than any the red minister could arrange for him.

CHAPTER V

"ONE BIDES HIS TIME—"

AS HE clattered south with Cyrano on the stone paved Orleans road past Chatillon and Arcueil, with his whole past and future nailed to the passport in his pocket, Vaugon realized very clearly upon what a precarious reed of faith he was leaning.

If the matter came to a definite issue of authority Vaugon saw clearly he could hope for nothing. The queen was powerless. The king was weak, ruled by his favorite, M. le Grand, or Cinq Mars, a young man mightily puffed up by brief authority. Mazarin was a shifty Italian who would cover his own traces adroitly.

With de Bergerac at his side, hope beckoned. That dissipated young poet was extremely self reliant, was enjoying his errand and his morning gallop in a marked degree and had no apparent care for the future. When two leagues had fallen behind and at Bourg la Reine they found themselves only fifteen minutes behind their quarry Cyrano leaned over in the saddle and laughed gaily.

"They'll stop at Berny, a league ahead!" he exclaimed. "Good wine there at the Croix, I can tell you! I don't know Fleurey, but the odds are even I'll know his companions, so we'll stop the three of them and go on."

Vaugon laughed and spurred his pounding black to new efforts.

"Three of them, eh?" he returned. "Pity that chap d'Artagnan isn't with us! I liked him. Forward then!"

As the two riders turned in at a courtyard in Croix de Berny, they saw three very fine horses being rubbed down by grooms.

"Caught!" said Cyrano.

"But not stopped," added Vaugon as he swung to earth. "Groom! Rub down these horses, cover them; a short drink and a handful of oats. We leave in half an hour."

He strode after Cyrano into the inn room, where three other men were making a hearty noon meal. He ordered wine and food. It was brought in short order and proved excellent. Over their meal Cyrano discussed the three cavaliers who sat across the room.

"No hurry—a sword works better on a full stomach," he said, grinning. "My grammar may be at fault, but the reasoning is excellent. I thought I'd know them. Both are gentlemen of the court, or rather of the Palais Cardinal! One's de Breuil, an excellent blade; the other, in the large beaver, is St. Aubin, the worst fool in Paris without exception!"

St. Aubin looked the part, indeed, being foppishly attired, loud voiced, vacuous. De Breuil was a dark, solid, level eyed man; as with Cyrano, his long arms bespoke the swordsman. It was upon Fleurey that Vaugon's attention centered however. He studied the man, sensing here an implacable antagonist.

Tall, powerfully knit, Fleurey became his handsome costume well. He too was handsome. As he laughed and talked with his two companions Vaugon decided that the man might well be popular among other men; behind the arrogance to be expected of a noble was a reckless vigor and driving force, a steely concentration of character, which might lead into wild excesses or inflexible greatness. Like his comrades, he wore chin tuft and mustache. Black, heavy lidded eyes glittered beneath heavy black brows which met above his nose, forming a bar across his face.

HUNGER appeased, thirst lightened by the excellent wine, Cyrano rose and looked around. De Breuil, gazing at him, leaned over to Fleurey and made some remark, at which Fleurey burst into laughter. Cyrano turned and approached their table, Vaugon following.

"Ah, my dear M. de Breuil," said Cyrano suavely, "you are in jesting mood today?"

De Breuil smiled. "You, M. de Cyrano! Upon my word, I didn't see you for the moment. There was—what shall I say?—an impediment. Yes, that's the word. Impediment to the sight—really, my dear M. de Cyrano, you should do something about it!"

The insult was patent, and as such was obviously due to the wine bottle. Cyrano went white and his hand flashed out to the other's face.

"I have done something about it, then," he said.

De Breuil started to his feet, but Vaugon came between them, fastening his gaze on Fleurey.

"When one gentleman forgets himself and draws attention to the misfortune of another," he said gravely, "only a stable boy would guffaw."

"Death of my life! Are you talking to me?" snapped Fleurey.

"To the stable boy who laughed, monsieur," said Vaugon calmly.

St. Aubin attempted a startled but ineffectual protest; Fleurey swept him aside and stood up.

"May I present Sieur Nicolas Vaugon?" said Cyrano delightedly.

"M. de Fleurey can not fight!" interposed St. Aubin excitedly. "He's going—"

"Silence!" exclaimed Fleurey angrily. "Fight? M. Vaugon shall discover that. Shall we ride down the road together, gentlemen?"

"As soon as I get a couple of bottles of this excellent wine," said Cyrano.

The host was summoned, scores were paid, the horses called up. In five minutes all had mounted and were riding forth, Fleurey leading the way.

"Devil take it," said Cyrano to his companion, as they followed the others, "you'd best not kill your man, or you'd be strung up, passport or no passport! A relative of the cardinal isn't a de Breuil. I'll kill him and that will delay them sufficiently."

Vaugon laughed.

"You seem sure of yourself, my friend!"

Cyrano only grinned.

A quarter mile from the inn they drew aside from the road and in a moment were encompassed by trees. In a long glade, free of snow, Fleurey dismounted, and a word from Cyrano assented at once; it was an excellent place, sunlit in the center, with good footing. While the excited St. Aubin remained with the horses, the four removed mantles, hats and coats, and bared their blades.

Until this moment Vaugon had paid no attention to his sword. Now, as he drew it, he received a shock of surprise; instead of being a fairly wide, fairly heavy rapier, it was a piece of extremely thin steel. Second look showed that this steel was damaskeened in gold on either side, and the fairylike balance of the weapon was a marvel.

"*Mordieu!*" exclaimed Cyrano. "Are you going to fight with a bodkin? Let's see it."

He took the sword, balanced it, bent the blade between his fingers and whistled in astonishment as he returned it.

"Every man to his own taste in women, wine and swords, my friend! It may serve. Ready, messieurs! If you'll be so good as to give the word."

"Are we to fight separately or as four?" demanded Fleurey.

"As you like," said Cyrano carelessly. "Put St. Aubin in and make it a party of five."

"Separately, then," said Fleurey. "*En garde, monsieur!*"

"*En garde!*" echoed de Breuil.

Vaugon found himself crossing swords with a wrist of steel; and then, to his own vast surprise, his duel was won almost before it had begun. The rapier in his hand was like a thing of light, so marvelous was its balance, so deftly did it meet the heavier steel of Fleurey. At Vaugon's first thrust, Fleurey staggered and dropped his weapon. That needle-like steel had ripped the length of his upper arm. He stooped and picked up his rapier with his left hand.

"Continue, monsieur," he said. "I can use the weapon with either hand."

Vaugon drew back and pointed to the rush of blood leaping down over Fleurey's hand.

"Another time, monsieur," he exclaimed. "St. Aubin—quick!"

Fleurey staggered. St. Aubin sprang forward, lowered him to the ground and went to work binding up his wound. It was in no way serious, save for the loss of blood. Vaugon turned and stared at the scene presented by the second combat.

IT WAS worthy of being stared at; if de Breuil were accounted one of the foremost rapiers in Paris, de Bergerac, despite his youth, was known as the most savage yet delicate duelist in the city. His long arms, his powerful torso, his agility, all served him in attack. He was attacking now, with a certain deliberate ferocity strange to see. And as he attacked he began to talk.

"We're well matched, my friend—well matched, eh? It'll be a pretty thing to watch, this—impossible to foretell the end? Ah, no! I know a very neat little feint and ripost in tierce—when the time comes. One must wait the time—there's the subject for a very satisfactory rondeau—"

"Curse your rhyming!" snapped de Breuil.

"Exactly."

Cyrano laughed. He fought mechanically, pressing the attack, and yet went on speaking as he fought, his voice light and almost jesting.

"One waits the time, in love or war—there's an excellent opening line! Come, what'll it lead to, my dear de Breuil? Not hard to guess—a slight change or two:

"One waits his time, in love or war,
 In travel, politics or crime;
Though gains be distant, victory far,
 One waits his time."

Cyrano's foot slipped; he was down to one knee, up again, de Breuil's rapier driving through his shirt without touching the flesh beneath. It was fast work, furious work, and both men were beginning to stream sweat. Then the lightly mocking voice of Cyrano rang out anew.

"A rondelet instead of a roundelay, you say? So be it then. We've an excellent start already, but one should have a bit of philosophy in the center of the feast, eh? Just to prepare for that feint and thrust in tierce . . .

"Fools hurry on, where wise men climb
 With care; a moment's haste may mar
 A lifework; patience is a star,
Beckoning on to heights sublime!
One waits his time."

De Breuil growled in his throat. He was fighting for his life now and knew it, read it in the hot and blazing dark eyes of Cyrano. He drew himself together, pressed in to the attack in his turn, bore the Gascon back and back; the veins of his face stood out in fury and he seemed set on steel springs, so perfect was his footwork. Yet Cyrano, face glistening with sweat, only smiled scornfully as he gave ground.

"Ha! I've found the rhyme at last, and we'll not use that thrust in tierce either!" he cried out. "For the throat, de Breuil, for the throat—my signature, as M. de Moray likes to term it! When the moment comes, then—now to finish that pretty rondelet:

"The moment comes, fate draws the bar,
Throws wide the portal! Here's my rhyme
Complete—death holds the door ajar—
One bides his time."

Cyrano thrust, thrust again, disengaged, and his arm shot out like light. A terrible cry broke from de Breuil. The rapier fell from his hand and he stood clutching at his throat until suddenly he pitched forward on his face. Cyrano wiped the sweat out of his eyes and stood panting. Then:

"Finished, Vaugon? Excellent. Not a bad rondelet I made on de Breuil, eh? Well, my dear Comte, can we be of any assistance to you?"

"You've killed him!" shouted St. Aubin, waving his arm. He ran to de Breuil, stooped over him and came erect. "You've killed him!"

Cyrano gave him a slow, disdainful stare. "What the devil else did you expect?"

"Silence, St. Aubin!" commanded Fleurey, getting to his feet. "Gentlemen, we need not trouble you; we'll return to the the Croix de Berny. To our next meeting, M. Vaugon!"

Vaugon saluted him in silence and, taking up his coat and mantle, donned them and followed Cyrano to the horses. They mounted and made their way out to the road.

"So! Let that fool St. Aubin do a little work," said Cyrano, breaking silence. "Well, my friend? Not so bad, eh? How did you manage him so swiftly?"

"Accident, I think," confessed Vaugon.

Cyrano gave him a swift look and laughed.

"Heaven send a few of your accidents my way, then! *Mordieu*, I had hard work of it for a moment! Well, let's be on! We've a good ride ahead of us if we're to reach that château before nightfall—and reach it we must. How did you like my rhyme?"

"Better than it's object," said Vaugon.

The Gascon broke into laughter.

"Object? My dear fellow, my object is to put point into the other man as rapidly as possible! Granted that my rhyming ability confuses him, but consider! I must do two things at once! The odds are palpably even."

BREAKING off his self revealing speech, Cyrano got out one of the bottles he had brought along and managed to get it open. He gulped down a good half of it, handed over the bottle to Vaugon and presently the two rode on refreshed. Rested by the double halt, the horses held on steadily to the south at a brisk trot.

They covered the two leagues farther to Lonjumeau at a brisk, steady pace, and when the old town on the Yvette opened out before them and they slowed down for the sharply descending approach Cyrano broke silence.

"My friend, here's where we leave the Orleans route. You can see the Ste. Genevieve road cutting across the crest beyond town there to the left. With your permission I propose to let you go on alone."

"Eh?" Vaugon looked at him in sharp surprise. "You're in earnest?"

"I'm always in earnest," Cyrano chuckled. "First, my horse isn't from the king's stables and he'll not go much farther at your pace. Second, I have a feeling that we're followed; whoever is after us knows you chiefly by my face, you comprehend? Third, our Mlle. de Closset expects one man, not two. If I wait here until night any pursuers will come up and be thrown off the trail. I'll put them on the Dampierre road. I'll ride on to Ste. Genevieve after dark and meet you tomorrow where you say."

"Fleurey won't set any one after us," protested Vaugon. "At least, so quickly. And what need of sacrificing yourself?"

"Tush and nonsense!" exclaimed Cyrano. "It's not Fleurey I fear, but Cardinalist spies back in Paris! Don't you know the queen is watched like a hawk?

I have the sensation of being followed; animal instinct, perhaps. No harm done if I wait here at the post tavern until morning and then come along."

"But I don't know what meeting place to set! I'm utterly ignorant of the country."

"That am not I," said Cyrano confidently. "If the girl goes along with you, she'll serve as guide. If not, find your way. We'll meet at noon tomorrow or before at the inn of Savigny—it's on the Orge, not far from her château, but off the roads. I was down there the summer campaign, healing a wound external and a wound internal in the most pleasant of company. A lady—but no matter. Agreed?"

To the echo of his laughter Vaugon shrugged.

"Agreed. Stop here for the night, then. The inn of Savigny tomorrow noon, without fail!"

NEXT morning Cyrano was just descending for his morning draught when he turned sharply from the inn room and strode out into the courtyard. A single rider, with a led horse, was just arrived. Cyrano gaped at the two splendid beasts, then again at the cavalier, under whose cloak showed his blue and silver uniform scarf.

"D'Artagnan!"

The cadet was ordering the saddle changed to his fresh horse, when Cyrano's delighted shout reached him. Cyrano followed it in person and clapped his long arms about the smaller man in a warm embrace.

"*Mordieu!* What horses you ride—uniform scarf, too. On business?"

"Of a sort," said d'Artagnan. "I'm chilled to death and hungry. Well, this is a lucky meeting. Where's our friend Vaugon?"

"Riding the roads."

Cyrano checked himself abruptly, meeting the searching eye of d'Artagnan. Peril suddenly dilated his nostrils.

"But come in, come in, rest and talk!"

The other followed him silently, and the host brought bread and wine. Cyrano shoved flagon and bottle at his guest.

"There! Wash the dust from your tongue, and then tell me what the devil you're doing away down here when you should be standing guard at the Louvre or the Palais Cardinal!"

D'Artagnan nodded and drank deeply. When he set down his cup his gaze countered that of Cyrano intently, probingly.

"Horses," he said, "from the stables of his Eminence. Uniform. Pistols at the saddle. What does all this suggest?"

"It suggests something devilish unpleasant," said Cyrano. "Arrest?"

"Not necessarily. As one good Gascon to another, my business doesn't concern you; does that make you rest easier?" D'Artagnan smiled. "If I'm not mistaken, there's trouble in your wake—at Berny, to be precise. Eh?"

"Frank talk or none," said Cyrano. "I'm off in five minutes."

"Well, then, take me with you! I'm at your service."

Cyrano's black brows met as he frowned across the table.

"We were wishing for your company only yesterday; but I smell a rat somewhere, my friend, and it smells like a rat in red, upon my word. Not that I doubt you in the least, but I doubt your beautiful horses."

"Not badly put. Come, a fair exchange!"

"Done," said Cyrano. "Whom are you to arrest?"

"No one, unless necessary. I've been sent to keep an eye on a lady. I gather she's in disguise as a man and is cooking up treason against the state. There you are."

"*Mordieu!*" Cyrano relaxed slightly. "I'm with Vaugon on his errand. Do you want to know what it is? We're to carry off a lady; what's better, a ward of the king! How's that for a fair exchange?"

"Are you serious?" D'Artagnan stared hard. He knew Vaugon was thought to be a woman in disguise; this was absurd, but none of his affair. "Eh? A royal ward? Man, that means the Bastille!"

"Not under the king's seal," said Cyrano stoutly. "You rascal, be frank with me! Has your errand anything to do with our Mlle. de Closset?"

"Nothing, upon my honor." Blank amazement seized on d'Artagnan. "De Closset? But she's the wealthiest unattached lady in France!"

"How d'you know?"

D'Artagnan shrugged.

"My dear Cyrano, I make it my business to know. Having no other means of advancement, I shall advance by means of the ladies; so far, at least, they're not indifferent to me! My campaign's most methodical, I assure you. I have all the good ones marked down."

CHAPTER VI

DAPPER DE BERVILLE

IT WAS nearly dark when Vaugon, who had dined comfortably at Ste. Genevieve, passed the gates of the Chateau de Closset and rode up the tree darkened avenue to the gray stone chateau beyond. He wondered vaguely what sort of woman he would see, but this point troubled him little. A groom came running out to take his horse and from the entrance hurried a footman with eager word.

"M. le Comte de Fleurey? You have baggages—"

"M. de Fleurey will not arrive until tomorrow," said Vaugon. "No, don't lead the horse away! Keep him here, as I am not stopping." Then to the footman, "I have important news for Mlle. de Closset and must see her at once. Announce Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

"If monsieur will follow me?"

After ten minutes of waiting in a very handsome little salon, Mlle. de Closset entered with an old and grim woman behind her, who took a chair and said nothing, but inspected the visitor sharply enough. At first glance Vaugon's heart sank. The girl before him was pretty enough, but he had hoped for other qualities. Violet eyes under dark brows, frippery of high piled hair, laces and flashing gems. He almost shrugged as he bowed low. Then her voice, a rather deep and rich contralto, struck quickly at him.

"So you are from M. de Fleurey—and he is not coming tonight?"

"He has been unavoidably detained, mademoiselle," said Vaugon gravely. "He asked me to give you this and to say he would be here tomorrow."

Did his name mean nothing to her? Had the queen been mistaken in saying she expected him? Vaugon could not tell. He extended the ring given him and a little cry of delight escaped the girl. She held it up, turning to her companion.

"See, here's the ring M. de Fleurey promised to bring me! Look at the pretty goldwork on it—but I forget. Monsieur, you are one of his friends? You'll remain as our guest?"

Vaugon bowed.

"I regret that I must depart instantly, mademoiselle, as I must regain Paris by tomorrow night."

"But surely you'll see M. de Fleurey on the way? He is stopping at Lonjomeau, perhaps?"

Vaugon assented. Swiftly, impulsively, the girl turned and pulled open an escritoire, against one wall, seized a quill and scratched a few lines. Then, as the older woman was about to speak, she turned quickly to Vaugon and extended the paper.

"Take this to him, monsieur; may I so far impose upon you? I trust he is not ill?"

"Not very," said Vaugon. "A slightly hurt arm, I believe. The surgeon has advised him to wait until morning before finishing his journey. I believe he fell from his horse."

He saw a flash of laughter liven her face at this and did not see just why. Then, since there was nothing else to do, he bowed over the hand she extended, bowed to the older woman and made his way out, cursing his mission and his own inability to carry it through.

Regaining his horse, he mounted, gave the groom a coin, and headed back down the avenue toward the gates. Only then did he venture to open the paper cupped in his hand and to read its message. His eyes widened.

> In an hour. Half a league from here, on the Morsan road.

A slow whistle of amazement broke from him. Had the girl been acting all the time? Yes, beyond doubt; here was the proof of it. He laughed, thrust away the paper and for a space his mood lightened. She had been quick enough, sharp enough, true.

"She may have sense enough to put a cloak over her silks, devil take her!" thought Vaugon in no little chagrin. "Cyrano was right; we'll have to have a coach and cart her about from inn to inn, from town to town—pest on the whole affair! It's mad folly."

He rode on through the gathering darkness until the road broke from the forest depths to strike out across the high ground for Morsan, then he dismounted, took a bottle of wine from his saddle bags and set himself to pass the time.

VAUGON had finished the bottle and was tramping up and down to warm his feet when he heard a voice caroling gaily under the trees. It was a young and joyous voice and at first he thought Mlle. de Closset was approaching, but on catching the words of the song he changed his mind; it was a new and popular air of Paris, which he had heard on Cyrano's lips during their ride south. It was no song for drawing rooms.

"Oh, Jacques was young and he longed to see
The joys of a soldier's life;
So he joined a troop of the cavalry,
By help of the captain's wife!

"Oh, Jacques was sent to the Low Countree
And down there he learned to fight;
But I heard tell in the cavalry
That he fought his best at night!"

Vaugon caught sight of a horse walking along the road toward him. The song went on.

The singer was approaching and, after another verse or two involving a young marquis and touching very frankly on matrimonial escapades, the song came to its conclusion:

"Oh, Jacques grew old, and proud was he
Of his marshal's baton now!
But how they grinned in the cavalry
At the horns on his battered brow!"

The singer came to an abrupt halt, perceiving Vaugon, and uttered a resounding oath.

"What ho, my lonely guardian of the forest! 'Ware of the wolves hereabouts! Come along with me and we'll go looking for warm wine and a deep bosomed country wench, eh? It's not far to Morsan, and at the White Horse there we can find all we seek and more. Come! Better a crust in company than a loaf alone, so into the saddle and we'll show these country folk how we play the game in Paris. Eh, comrade?"

Vaugon saw a cavalier whose plumed beaver and scarf proclaimed the soldier. A young blade, evidently; no doubt some noble of the neighborhood intent upon practising Paris debauchery in the provinces and careless what happened.

"Thanks for the invitation," rejoined Vaugon, "but I've other business, so don't let me detain you."

"Bah! Life's long and love's short!" answered the other, dismounting with lithe agility.

"Be on your way," said Vaugon irritably. "I've no desire for company!"

"Eh? Why not, then?" The recklessness of the youthful voice deepened in anger. "Is this the way you treat a comrade? Let's have a look at you, my friend? Death of my life, if you haven't the look of that same rascal who pinked poor de Fleurey this morning! Eh?"

The other came close, long rapier cocking up his cloak behind. Vaugon cursed softly at the situation, scenting trouble with this drunken sprig of nobility.

"Comrade, I'm awaiting a lady," he said with assumed frankness. "Therefore, I beg of you, ride your way and—"

"A lady? Oh-ho!" exclaimed the other, stepping back. "No lady hereabouts except Mlle. de Closset, so that's the way of it, eh? Be damned to you for a foul liar, then! And here's what I think of you—"

His rapier scraped forth and flashed in the starlight.

"*En garde!*" he cried, and he lunged.

Vaugon's thin blade was already out; he parried with a curse, found his own steel gripped and held by the other, knew he was facing no ordinary swordsman. Then, as the blades clicked and rasped, his opponent broke into a laugh.

"Fell from his horse, eh? That was a rare one, when all the world knows de Fleurey is the finest horseman in France."

Vaugon leaped back in sudden amazement.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

His opponent lowered sword and broke into a laugh.

"Ha! So we condescend to questions now? Chevalier de Berville, at your service! I'm in search of a certain Sieur Vaugon."

"I am he," said Vaugon, staring.

"So I thought. If you'd been halfway polite about it, instead of devilish gruff and dignified, I'd have given you my message in the first place."

"Your pardon," said Vaugon, putting up his sword. "You have a message for me?"

"Naturally," rejoined de Berville. "We are to ride on together. The lady whom you await will join us tomorrow morning."

Vaugon shrugged. Undoubtedly the girl did not care to trust herself in the hands of an unknown man, regardless of who had sent him.

"I know nothing of you, M. de Berville," he said quietly, "and if you will allow—"

The chevalier laughed and thrust away his rapier.

"Monsieur, I am an old friend of mademoiselle and in her confidence. Come! We were both at fault; let us be friends and speak frankly. You were sent by the queen; therefore you are to be trusted."

Vaugon clasped hands, met with a firm yet delicate grip, knew he was dealing with some young noble of the neighborhood.

"Agreed. I have a friend who has arranged to meet us at the inn of Savigny, somewhere near here."

"Excellent!" said de Berville. "I'm to leave word for her at Morsan. We'll be there in half an hour, ride on to Savigny, and wait there—a retired place, none better! To horse, then!"

THEY mounted and set forth, leaving the trees behind and jogging along the wind swept heights. De Berville, after a little silence, broke into garrulous talk of friendship.

"For all I know," said Vaugon, "you may be a spy, my friend. I came to your cousin with certain guarantees; you come to me with a wine thick tongue."

De Berville held out a hand, and in the starlight Vaugon saw the glitter of the same little gold ring he had carried south.

"Answer enough?"

"Enough, comrade," said Vaugon. "You're her cousin, bear her trust; I ask no more."

"Then pardon the wine, perhaps, if I do," and de Berville laughed. "Who are you?"

"Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

"Hm! That name was agreed on because no such person exists. I know you're a gentleman, but I'm devilish curious to know more! And who's the friend to meet tomorrow?"

Vaugon laughed and unbent a trifle.

"About me there's nothing more to know. His Majesty has given me my present name; therefore I keep it. My friend is a guardsman, one de Bergerac."

"Therefore a Gascon. Pest take it, but you're a stiff one!" cried de Berville, half angry, half amused, to judge by his tone. "What do you plan to do, then? Where go?"

"That depends on the danger."

"Of which there will be plenty."

"And on your fair cousin. We'll have to get a coach for her, trail her around over the country, Lord knows what else!"

"You don't seem to relish the prospect."

"I don't. Who would?"

"Bah! She's a pretty baggage, that girl! Most men would think themselves in luck."

Vaugon shrugged.

"Stick her on a horse and tie her feet; she'll pull through. I've ridden with that girl and she's no *precieuse.* Work and weather won't spoil her."

"That remains to be seen. There's Morsan ahead."

They rode into Morsan, a little village nestled under the long hills, paused at the tavern while de Berville spoke a few words to a groom, then rode on. The chevalier led the way to a narrow road that wound down the hill and on toward the Orge.

"You've left directions for her, therefore for any pursuers," said Vaugon, as the horses descended the steep path.

"We'll leave further directions at Savigny, never fear!" De Berville laughed gaily. "Half a league away in the wood; we'll soon be there. An honest tavern, that, with a most admirable cellar, too."

A short road, indeed, and desolate. In twenty minutes they were clattering across the bridge and heading on to the village, where a comfortable old inn jogged elbows with the church and monastery. Vaugon suddenly realized as he dismounted that he was utterly weary and saddle sore.

"Shall we share a room?" said de Berville, when a groom come to his call. "I'm minded to eat and try a bottle or two of wine."

"Suit yourself as to that," said Vaugon. "All I want is a bed. I haven't ridden a horse in two years, before yesterday, and you know what that means."

"Death of my life! Two years? Where've you been? In the Bastille?"

Vaugon caught his breath. What a fool to talk thus freely.

"Perhaps," he said with a laugh, and staggered toward the host who had appeared. "A room, a fire, my saddlebags—and peace!" he ordered.

HE WAKENED to a misty morning, the sun showing as a red ball above the hills. He was dressing when a knock sounded at his door; and to his call de Berville entered. Vaugon swung around, waved his razor in reply to a gay greeting and examined the chevalier curiously.

"You're a late one!" said de Berville, dropping into a chair. "Saddle-stiff?"

"As the devil," said Vaugon. "I'll be through in a moment."

He continued shaving, with half an eye on his companion. De Berville was fair, blue eyed, perhaps forty years of age—older than Vaugon had thought the previous night. His features were stamped with a singular expression of vigor, of energy. The heavy lidded eyes were almost startling in their imperious command. The man was rather stout, his clothes were travel stained yet of princely material, and on his slender white fingers glittered half a dozen jeweled rings.

"When does our friend arrive?" asked Vaugon.

"She's here now."

"What? Already?" Vaugon turned. "Where is she?"

De Berville jerked his thumb at the floor and smiled enigmatically.

"Ordering a morning meal for us all. Don't worry, I've trained her, and she'll not bring any pursuers on us! The sharp blue eyes probed suddenly at Vaugon. "But come, my friend! I'm going to leave you here, or within a league of here, and I have a certain responsibility toward this fair cousin of mine. Would you object to telling me why you haven't straddled a horse for two years?"

Vaugon wiped his razor carefully, wiped his face, dried it. Then he met the keen blue eyes of the other.

"I would object, M. de Berville," he said coldly.

The chevalier laughed and showed very white and even teeth.

"Good. It's true that I get very little news from Paris, yet occasionally some comes to me from other quarters. I was in England some time ago—a trifle over two years ago—and there I heard of the very strange disappearance of a promising young man. Shall I continue?"

"If you like," said Vaugon, going on with his dressing.

Yet a cold hand had laid hold of him. Who or what the devil was this country noble?

"I might say that I know who this promising young man was," said the chevalier calmly. "In fact, I might say that I know who you are, Sieur Vaugon—"

Vaugon turned abruptly, with so chill and terrible eyes that the other fell silent.

"M. de Berville," he said, very quietly yet clearly enough, "if you persist in a subject which is distasteful to me, I shall kill you within two minutes."

"My dear friend, I'm thinking only of your good."

"No protests," said Vaugon curtly. "I should kill you here and now, but I am not yet so afraid for my own neck. De Berville—that name is a lie, I think! Touched you there, did I?"

He smiled thinly as he noted the chevalier's slight change of expression.

"Perhaps the matter of identity is as tender with you as with me, eh? Last night I took you for a rustic young man; this morning I perceive you are neither so very young nor so very rustic. I'm not interested in you. If your interest in me continues, I promise you it will meet with a sword thrust. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," said de Berville, and he smiled again. "May I, at least, give you a well meant bit of advice?" He rose. "Don't go to Paris, whatever you do. There are certain people in Paris who may remember that the late Duc de Montmorenci had a triangular mole just before his ear. We'll await you below, comrade. Come soon. I'm looking for a messenger to meet me here this morning, and may have to ride off without delay."

De Berville swung out of the room, humming gaily.

For a moment Vaugon stood motionless, staring blankly before him. That mole! He knew well enough it was the only thing that might betray him, and so he had left his hair uncut before his ears, to cover it. And this country noble had pierced to the truth of everything in five minutes!

He found them at a window table in the main room of the tavern, and he met with a distinct surprise. Instead of a girl, he found a very handsome young man awaiting him. The previous evening he had seen and talked with the girl, yet he could not recognize either her features or her sex in the cloaked and velveted cavalier who bowed to him with laughing eyes and a gay greeting. Only her voice could have betrayed her.

"Good morning, Sieur Vaugon!" she exclaimed merrily. "You didn't expect to see me?"

"You, but not as you are," said Vaugon, and de Berville laughed out at this.

"No, he was looking for a frail damsel who'd shriek at the rasp of a sword! Well, M. Vaugon, this is our friend the Comte de Plessis. Sit down and ask him what my real name is, if you like. None of us are using our own names, it seems."

Vaugon shrugged, as he took a seat.

"I've no such intention, de Berville. As it happens I am using my own name. Since the king has bestowed it on me I shall keep it."

"Cunning or simplicity?" said de Berville, half mockingly.

"Devil take you," snapped Vaugon, leaning forward with a blaze in his eyes, "what are you driving at? My word is my word. If you've anything to say about it, then say it and have done. If not, keep your tongue between your teeth!"

A flash of anger shot through the blue eyes of de Berville, then was gone.

"Good. The subject's closed," he returned.

De Plessis had looked from one to the other anxiously, sharp uneasiness in the violet eyes; Vaugon divined that this anxiety was not for him, but for the chevalier. At this instant, however, came interruption, as a horse pounded into the courtyard and a man called out sharply, urgently, as he swung to earth.

"De Berville! De Berville!"

The man appeared in the doorway, dust covered, blue with cold, evidently a gentleman, but as evidently in desperate haste. De Berville rose and beckoned. "Come along, Armand! All's safe. Here's wine. You have news? Give it freely."

The man staggered forward, dropped into a chair, saluted the three and gulped at the wine de Berville put into his hand. A long breath escaped him.

"*Diantre!* A cold morning. Safe to talk?"

"Yes," said de Berville, impatiently. "What is it?"

"Danger. Something's discovered. St. Briis brought word that men are out on all the eastern roads, a network of them, working south, combing every road. If you head north and east, you're gone. Nothing known certainly."

"No news from Mazarin?" asked de Berville, his eyes shining as if he enjoyed this message of danger.

"None. I saddled and rode to catch you here if possible. Your only chance now is to head westward."

"Good. We ride at once. Host! Have my horse saddled." De Berville held out one hand to de Plessis, the other to Vaugon and laughed gaily. "I'm off, my friends. We'd only bring danger on one another. De Plessis, you can trust Sieur Vaugon absolutely, you comprehend? Absolutely. His presence is a miracle. Vaugon, forget your worries and remember only that Comte de Plessis is a comrade who needs no coach, but who can endure as much as you or more. Farewell and good luck! Damnation to the cardinal and a joyous meeting at his funeral! Adieu, my cousin—don't see us off, remain here. Adieu!"

Toward noon Cyrano and d'Artagnan rode in, well ahead of the hour set.

CHAPTER VII

A FIGHT IN A FOG

"NAME of a name—d'Artagnan here!" Vaugon, gripping hands at once with the guardsman and the cadet, stared at the latter in open astonishment. He caught Cyrano's grimace but did not understand it.

"Aye," said Cyrano. "We joined forces at Lonjumeau this morning, rode hard and here we are. When we left the main road at Epinay we heard that M. de Fleurey had just passed through, riding alone. I'll wager a pistole that devilish fool St. Aubin stopped behind to set the world after me for killing Breuil! Well, what luck, comrade?"

"Plenty," said Vaugon. "But you, d'Artagnan—why, it's a miracle! Come in and welcome!"

He led them into the tavern and to the table where de Plessis stood up to meet them.

"Two friends instead of one," said Vaugon. "M. le Comte de Plessis, I am delighted to present M. Cyrano de Bergerac and M. d'Artagnan!"

"We'll have an army if this keeps up!"

De Plessis laughed as he shook hands. In the manner of d'Artagnan there showed instant comprehension of her identity. Cyrano was slower, but the girl's next words showed him the truth.

"So you ride with us, gentlemen! I give you thanks, which is all I can give save my friendship; that is yours already. Sit down, sit down! Time for wine."

D'Artagnan gave Vaugon a frowning glance, made a slight gesture. Vaugon nodded.

"Cyrano," he said, "I leave the road of evasion to your wits. Confer with M. de Plessis while I have a word apart with d'Artagnan, by your leave."

"Eh?" Cyrano turned. His challenging, black browed gaze drove at the cadet. "Oh, all right! Ask him for whom he carries an order of arrest while you're about it."

With this, Cyrano turned again to the girl. Vaugon sensed a definite antagonism and sensed it anew in the manner of d'Artagnan as the two of them went to a farther table. The host brought wine and cups and they were alone.

"Well?" said Vaugon, his gaze on d'Artagnan. "It appears there's some tension in the air—and yet we parted friends."

"We are friends," answered d'Artagnan, with a slight flush mounting his cheek. "The best proof is that I am going to lay my cards before you—aye, on this very table! Cyrano suspects my errand and misconstrues it. I have been sent to arrest a woman masquerading as a man."

Vaugon frowned.

"What? Surely not—"

"Our friend yonder? Not a bit of it." D'Artagnan smiled whimsically. "I gave Cyrano my word that this errand was not concerned with Mlle. de Closset. Look you, comrade! Here's frank speech. I've only one aim in life—to rise. There are two ways one may follow to this height; by the road of duty, or by the road of women. Some men choose one, some the other. I choose both! And here, death of my life, I'm in conflict on both heads! It's a devil of a predicament."

Vaugon sipped his wine, waiting. The other went on quietly.

"Richelieu rules France, but Mazarin has his fingers clenched in the old lion's mane, my friend! That Italian is a sharp man, twists the cardinal to his notion—a good one to work with, this Mazarin! Well, the cardinal thinks that one of his deadliest enemies, a woman, a traitress, is going about France disguised as a man. Further, he thinks this man carries a passport naming him Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

Vaugon started and his gray eyes widened.

"Is this a jest, d'Artagnan?"

"It's damnable earnest!" d'Artagnan flung out his hands helplessly, then leaned forward. "Absurd? Of course it's absurd! All tragedy is absurd. I suspect Mazarin's hand in this. It may be your name came up, and to avert suspicion from your real errand, Mazarin swung the cardinal into this false trail. At all events, some one reported our dinner at the Pinecone, and I was summoned as knowing your face."

D'Artagnan emptied his cup, wiped his lips and continued:

"Richelieu questioned me and learned nothing, I assure you. He had already sent out men in one direction. Devil take it, I can't tell you more than duty permits! There's a line drawn by duty which friendship can't pass."

Vaugon nodded, alertly.

"Understood. Tell me what you can, then."

"Well, I've been sent to find you, as they knew you headed south. When you head for a certain city, or when you exchange any letters, I'm to seize the letters and arrest you. Meantime, I'm to give you free rein, on condition that I bring you ultimately to Richelieu by arrest, guile, or otherwise. You see? Up to a certain point I'm a free agent."

"I see," and Vaugon nodded. "Richelieu doesn't suspect my real identity?"

"Not in the least, upon my word! He thinks Sieur Vaugon is some great lady whom he has exiled. I don't know her name myself. Now, I've nothing to do with de Plessis, who is of course our m'amselle in disguise, or with Cyrano. Solely with you. There are my cards, comrade, and I'm damned if I know how to play them!"

Vaugon frowned thoughtfully.

"This is a devilish imbroglio!" he mused aloud. "If Richelieu knew I was no woman—"

"Easily proven," d'Artagnan grinned. "But my orders are my orders. I'm to bring Sieur Vaugon to him."

THEY came back to the other table, and Vaugon caught a sharp look from Cyrano. He clapped the Gascon heartily on the shoulder.

"We make four," he announced. "M. d'Artagnan rides with us; our cause is his. Now, whither do we ride? For Sedan?"

Only Cyrano, who missed nothing, caught the sharp glint in d'Artagnan's eyes at this word. De Plessis shook his head.

"Not for Sedan," he said. "The roads are closed there. We've concluded, Vaugon, that our best chance would be to cut across the Orleans road and either make southwest for Rambouillet and the forest of Ivelines, or else north around Paris for Pontoise."

D'Artagnan relaxed and reached for wine.

"Good," said Vaugon, indifferently. "But we've no definite objective to gain, except to kill time and stay out of sight, so why try to map out a route? Let's get across the Orleans highway first and then follow our luck. If by any chance things get too hot, we can always double back to Paris—the best place of all to hide."

"At a pinch, yes," said Cyrano. "Agreed, then. We strike first for Palaiseau and then make further plans. To your taste, d'Artagnan?"

"Admirably," said the latter, twirling his mustache and then lifting his cup. "To our good comrade de Plessis! By the way," he added when the toast was drunk, "how are we off for money?"

"Mazarin provided me," said Vaugon.

"I provided myself," laughed de Plessis as he tapped his pocket.

"Richelieu provided me," said d'Artagnan, whereat de Plessis gave him a look of sharp astonishment. Cyrano made a grimace.

"Naked I came into this world," he intoned, "and naked I go out of it. The lord will provide, thanks to a cardinal and an abbé! We've an extra horse."

"Then sell mine at Palaiseau," said de Plessis, rising. "Finish your wine, comrades. Vaugon and I will get our beasts ready."

Vaugon accompanied him to the courtyard. In the eager, nervous stride of de Plessis, in the too soft accents, he could distinguish the woman; but in little else. Once outside, de Plessis turned quickly to him after sending a groom for the horses.

"Who's this d'Artagnan? He spoke of Richelieu."

"Who sent him to arrest me." Vaugon laughed and explained briefly, as they waited. "You see? The great cardinal is caught in a net of errors. He thinks Sieur Nicolas Vaugon is a woman in disguise, and he wants to make sure of her. There's no peril in it for you. If anything does happen to me, if that passport has put me into danger instead of lifting me above it, Cyrano will take my mission on his own shoulders. Meantime d'Artagnan's to be trusted."

"Of course," murmured de Plessis. "He's not to be forgotten, though! What would happen if you were arrested and taken to Richelieu?"

Vaugon broke into an amused laugh as he pictured such a contingency.

"Faith, I don't know who'd be more confounded—the cardinal or I! What woman could he take me for, I wonder?"

The violet eyes danced and glittered merrily. "Whom, indeed! Marie de Medici, perhaps, or Mme. de Chevreuse, or any one of a dozen others! Come along, then. We four have no secrets, it appears, so here are the horses and the road's before us. Hola, comrades! All ready."

No secrets, indeed! In the sudden flash of those violet eyes, in the nuance of the contralto voice, Vaugon read the truth. De Berville must have imparted to this girl what he suspected about Vaugon, whom he knew Vaugon to be.

A few minutes more and all four of them were jogging along a hillside path for Grand Vaux, Epinay and the western highway, which crossed the Orleans road at Lonjumeau. De Plessis and d'Artagnan, with the spare horse, rode ahead; Cyrano followed with Vaugon. The mists of early morning had not dissipated, but on the contrary had continued and were thickening into a blanket of fog hanging close upon the hills and valley.

"A splendid cavalier, this little lady of ours!" exclaimed Cyrano. "*Mordieu!* The game may go well enough, comrade!"

Vaugon nodded, eying the lithe cloaked figure of de Plessis with approval. The girl made a very proper cavalier to any casual eye.

"Hm! See if you know such a man as this." Vaugon told of his meeting with de Berville, and how the latter had hurriedly ridden off. "Who the devil could the fellow be? No ordinary person, certainly a noble at least."

"Faith, I don't know all Paris," said Cyrano. "Never heard the name and can't place your friend. So that's how you knew the eastern roads were being searched! He did us a good turn there. And if he's an enemy of the cardinal, we needn't fear him. What I don't like is having this d'Artagnan with us."

"We've made truce."

Vaugon detailed his agreement. Cyrano sniffed.

"Truce! He's a real Gascon, that one; look out for yourself! A gentleman? of course, but a shrewd and devilish sharp young rascal! And with a supreme eye to his own fortune. On the road down I got to know our young friend. I'll wager a pistole he's making love to de Plessis this moment. We're not sitting in a tavern, comrade; we're on the road to death or fortune, and it's devil take the hindmost! Gentleman, my eye! I've nothing to lose, everything to gain, by sticking to you. D'Artagnan doesn't give a hand for anything except winning his own game, so look to it. He'll get on in the world, that one."

"Leave him to me," said Vaugon, refusing to accept this viewpoint. "All our future hangs on incident; don't force it! If I'm put out of the game, you take de Plessis and carry on."

"Aye; likely enough, too," said Cyrano gloomily. "Fleurey is no fool. We'll run risks at Lonjumeau, but should be well ahead of any alarm. So forward!"

Having unloaded his burden of woe, Cyrano promptly swung to the other extreme and, when the four riders clattered into the paved highway at Epinay, he was matching campaign yarns with d'Artagnan in a species of wild gusto. In all he did Cyrano was not only intense, but went to astonishing extremes. D'Artagnan, too, flung off his sober air, matched youth with youth and Vaugon found himself catching the contagion. Within an hour all constraint had vanished, and if some of Cyrano's jests were a trifle broad, de Plessis laughed as heartily as the others. It was not a squeamish age by a good deal.

WHEN they rode into Lonjumeau and halted perforce at the post tavern, came an incident to more than justify Vaugon's confidence in the cadet. The valley of the Yvette was thick with fog and the town was shrouded with it. The four had just dismounted and Vaugon was directing the feed of the horses, when into the innyard poured a flood of riders, most of them cavalry officers. Vaugon heard one startled howl and turned to find St. Aubin and two officers at his side.

"Here's the one who fought Fleurey!" cried the noble. "There's the one who killed Breuil—seize them all for dueling—swiftly—"

"Messieurs, your names?" exclaimed an officer, facing Vaugon.

"And authority." Vaugon drew out his passport. "If you'll have the goodness to silence this yelping fool, here's a document to speak for me."

St. Aubin broke into curses. The officer, glancing at the passport, changed countenance.

"M. Vaugon, you are under his Majesty's seal—and yet—"

"And yet," spoke out d'Artagnan, opening his cloak to show his uniform scarf, "one of his Majesty's officers refuses to acknowledge the royal signature? Very odd, monsieur!"

The officer bowed.

"I do not refuse. I salute, gentlemen," he said, and turned away. "Come, St. Aubin, you've been too hasty in this affair."

They were gone into the mist. D'Artagnan caught Vaugon's arm.

"Take your time. Eat, drink, bait the horses and ourselves; they won't stop us. Come along! We're safe in the town, at least. Out of it—well, we'll see!"

The four swung into the inn room, secured a table and made light of the matter.

"Bah!" exclaimed Cyrano grandly. "The passport has saved us from the cavalry, at least! St. Aubin will scurry around and raise a few gentlemen to get after us, and we can't hide our tracks. D'Artagnan, a health to you! We seal friendship anew. Now, if my invention were but perfected, how easy to evade!"

"What invention?" demanded de Plessis.

"To reach the moon, *mordieu!* Here's the meat; at it!"

They saw or heard no more of St. Aubin, though a number of officers were in the tavern. Without loss of time they had the horses prepared and were on their way again. Once through town and on the road to Champlan and Palaiseau they had a clear field ahead.

Across the bridge, past the gates unstopped, the four swung into a fast trot. The fog lessened as they gained higher ground, yet continued as a thick, cold mist. With luck they should reach Palaiseau for the night.

HERE was a good league of riding over upland road to Champlan, with never a hamlet in between, scarce a struggling farm, for these lay leftward toward the river. They had covered half the distance when toward them through the mist came a galloping horse, riderless yet saddled, and passed them with a snort and a fleck of foam, unpausing.

"Fright and blood," exclaimed d'Artagnan, twisting to stare after the dim shape. "Ride ahead, Cyrano. Army tactics here!"

"Right," said Cyrano and he spurred off into the mist. "Travelers waylaid, perhaps . . ."

He had no time now to think. From the road behind he caught a faint thrumming throb, the clatter and pound of horses galloping in unison. Alarm was on his lips when, out of the mist ahead, came a pistol shot and the bellowing voice of Cyrano.

"To me, comrades! Assassins . . ."

"Between us, de Plessis!" cried out d'Artagnan. "Close in, Vaugon!"

The three horses plunged forward. Shadowy figures took shape ahead in the mist. As he drew sword in one hand, pistol ready in the other, Vaugon caught sight of two men against a huge oak tree beside the road, afoot. They were hemmed in by half a dozen cavaliers, among whom Cyrano's beast was plunging madly. Even as he looked, even as the shouts of alarm rang out, one of the two by the tree crumpled up and went down.

"*Vive le cardinal!*" went up a yell.

"*Vive le roi!*" shouted d'Artagnan, and the three were into the tumult full pace.

Pistols banged out, men shouted, steel crossed. Vaugon found an opening, reined in, saw the man against the tree was de Berville, and emptied his pistol into a cavalier whose sword was uplifted for the thrust. For half a moment it was a mad, blind melée of plunging horses and cursing men, and Vaugon damned the wild recklessness of Cyrano which had drawn them all into this embroglio. The dead man by the tree was Armand, the companion of de Berville. The chevalier himself had caught a horse and was scrambling into the saddle.

Sharp amazement at this meeting swept Vaugon. He saw de Plessis at one side, turned his horse. And then, like a thunderbolt, another band of riders burst from the mist and smashed headlong into the confusion. St. Aubin's sharp yelp showed that the pursuers had come up.

What with the cloaking fog, the burst of pistols, the ring of swords, there was no time for questions or answers; the scene became a wild riot of insensate, panic struck fighting, without rhyme or reason. A fallen horse had blocked the road, and others piled up across the body, and here gathered a swirl of striking figures. Vaugon caught sight of de Berville leaning over, thrusting, laughing as an opponent went down; then he saw de Plessis engaged with a man at the right. Sharp anxiety for the girl thrust at him and he spurred to her help with a shout.

"Aside, de Plessis—get out of it!" he cried, coming up, shouldering the other horse aside with his own beast, engaging his own blade with that of the cavalier, a war scarred rascal who grinned and thrust viciously at him. The horses plunged as the blades clicked and clung; then Vaugon felt his own lithe, slender steel drive home, saw his opponent lean over and clutch at the saddle, saw him go away into the mist and be swallowed.

Vaugon turned to find de Plessis. A sudden harsh scream was wrenched from him. He felt the blade go deep into him from behind, heard a shrill, foxlike yelp, twisted around to see St. Aubin at his stirrup with contorted, exultant features. Only dimly did Vaugon realize that his own rapier swept around, drove in, sent the point home on shortened blade and followed to the very hilt, followed until Vaugon's fist touched the face of St. Aubin as the latter clutched his throat and went screaming backward.

The wrench of the blade all but unseated Vaugon, yet he came clear in his hand, and up beside him loomed the slender figure of de Plessis, face white, eyes blazing large. He put up his sword, caught at the other's bridle.

"Out of it, out of it!" he cried, but his voice was very weak. His spurs hit in, and the two horses swerved aside, dashed from the road, emerged from the lessening fury of the tumult.

There Vaugon's memory of events went blank.

CHAPTER VIII

FRIENDSHIP RIPENS

VAUGON wakened to strange peace after that horrible nightmare of fog and men gone mad. True, he was still in fog, but he lay on the ground, his head pillowed in the lap of de Plessis, while de Berville completed the work of bandaging his side and then held a flask of cognac to his lips. The fiery stuff brought him around, fast enough, and warmed him.

"Not dead, then?" he said, smiling up at de Berville.

"No, and far from it," returned the chevalier, wiping blood from his jeweled fingers with an odd expression of distaste. "We must get on; they'll be searching. What a devil of confusion, eh? Give me your arm."

Vaugon was presently on his feet, leaning on de Plessis, while de Berville brought up their three horses.

"Our comrades?" he inquired.

"Heaven knows," said de Plessis, with a shrug. His face was thin and strained, the violet eyes large. "I thought you were dead—met the chevalier—"

De Berville came and laughed.

"What a meeting it was, eh? Those Cardinalists had us done for. One of them, a rusty faced rascal, had been in my service at one time, and recognized me. Armand's dead. Then you came, and after you, who?"

"St. Aubin," said Vaugon, "and some of his friends in pursuit of us. They had recognized me and Cyrano in town. Well, St. Aubin's dead now, and so is your rusty faced rogue."

"Good news, then," said de Berville. "So you were making westward by the same route I chose, eh? This means hiding for us all. Now, can you make it?"

Vaugon made it with an effort. St. Aubin's blade had torn his side badly and slipped along his ribs, but had not pierced into him. A moment more and he was riding through the mist with the other two on each side. They were off the road, enveloped in the ghastly silence of thick fog, apparently alone in the world.

Cyrano and d'Artagnan—well, whatever had happened, worry would do no good. Vaugon, weak with loss of blood, sank into a dazed coma as the endless ride continued hour upon hour. He dimly realized that they had come upon a country road and that de Berville appeared to have some definite goal in view, but he took no interest in it all. Even the strange trick of fate which had flung them again into contact with de Berville failed to arouse him. He plodded on, head hanging, conscious yet dazed, his faculties concentrated on keeping in the saddle.

The chevalier appeared entirely untroubled, entirely sure of himself. De Plessis begged him to ride on and leave them; the girl stated truly enough that she could take Vaugon to some country *auberge* where they would be safe, but de Berville laughed at her.

"Bah! I left you because my company was dangerous for you; now that we're together for the time, my company can get you safe bestowal. Besides, I can't go on as I am; they'll know I'm at large, they'll search every road, be sure! De

Fleurey will be hotfoot after you and me."

"Where are you going then?" asked de Plessis anxiously.

"To the Tour de Gisy—a long chance, our only hope! Although he hates me, Sieur de Gisy will aid me, or rather you. Leave it to me, cousin. There's humiliation in it, but better humiliation here in the woods than in the Palais Cardinal at Paris!"

Vaugon thought the man was out of his head and he laughed hollowly.

"Both of you go; leave me," he muttered. "I've failed you, de Plessis—"

"Because a coward stabbed you in the back? Devil take me if I'll leave you!" swore de Plessis, as she reached over to clap her gauntleted hand on his for a moment. "Brace up, comrade! We'll beat the red cardinal yet!"

They rode on and Vaugon sank again into coma, for the bandage had slipped and his wound began to bleed slowly, steadily. He said nothing of it. What matter?

SNOW was coming down as they entered the chateau, de Berville helping the stumbling Vaugon, to whom all this was like some incomprehensible, fantastic dream. There was fantasy enough in it, too, for they came into a huge, somber room lighted by candelabra and a great fireplace. Vaugon sank down into a chair and remained half conscious.

Then he was aware of a man bowing, bringing de Berville's fingers to his lips, and this drew a laugh from him. Only a woman, or a prince of the blood, could exact such a greeting! Was de Berville, then, the king's brother? At his laugh they turned and stared, but Vaugon's head had sunk on his breast.

"You do me too much honor," said the Lord of Gisy, his voice very bitter, not half so bitter as were his eyes, however; from his bearded face, they looked upon de Berville with very near hatred. "Too much honor! These fifteen years you have forgotten me, after vilely betraying my honor and love."

"Why, that's true enough," said de Berville, facing him steadily, white faced in the ruddy firelight. "True enough, Raoul de Gisy! I don't hide behind excuses."

"Then how dare you come here to ask my aid?" The cold voice deepened. "Aid? No, by the lord! I'd give you nothing, sell you nothing, not if you bartered me yourself in exchange!"

It was certainly Monsieur, thought Vaugon dimly—the royal prince who had betrayed all of his associates. Yet the Duc d'Orleans was a coward and de Berville anything but a craven.

"You're not the devil, to barter for souls." De Berville laughed a little. "No, Raoul, if alone I'd never have come here. But I humiliate myself for others."

"Aye, you were always generous enough," said Sieur de Gisy, in a gloomy, grudging voice. "Generous with gold, with love, with friends, with crime and intrigue! Why should I do anything for your friends? Richelieu is after you? Then let the damned cardinal take you for all I care! He has taken every friend I had in the past."

"Aye, he took your best friend, Raoul," said de Berville. "That was years ago. And I wronged you, that's true enough. Today, with two friends, with the roads searched for me, with one friend wounded, I turned to you. I ask your aid. Why?"

Sieur de Gisy laughed harshly and his cold eyes glittered.

"Let Richelieu have your friends—traitors like yourself!" he said icily. "I'd not turn over my hand to save them from him, though I hate him enough. Shelter, hospitality, aid—go seek them elsewhere, you and yours, or die in the snow. It's all one to me."

Vaugon was conscious of sudden light upon his face and looked up to see de Berville holding a candelabra above him so that it illumined his profile.

"All one to you, Raoul?" De Berville's voice was half mocking. "Is it all one to you, indeed? Look, then! You knew and I knew too a man who bore this selfsame visage, even to the mole by the ear."

Vaugon stirred, anger piercing to him, vaguely rousing him.

"Blast you!" he cried out thickly and struggled to reach his feet, his hand lashing out at de Berville vainly. "Devil take you, I warned you once to drop that subject."

Pain stabbed through him and that was all he remembered.

A LONG while after, the Lord of Gisy came to the bedside and stood looking down at Vaugon.

"I owe you thanks," said the latter, "for hospitality."

The bitter gray eyes chilled him, silenced him.

"You owe me nothing," said de Gisy. "Is it true, as I hear, that you wish to be Sieur Vaugon?"

"Quite true."

"Then I think the less of you," came the harsh words. "Once, my dearest friend was the Duc de Montmorenci. That you should willingly become—ah, no matter! For the sake of old times this house is yours. I ask no questions; I desire to see you no more. When you wish to leave, then leave. That you should give up your name and heritage is an insult to the dead and to the living. Farewell."

Sieur de Gisy strode out of the room, and Vaugon saw him never again, for after this he must have remained strictly to himself. His words left hurt enough, however. Some little while after de Plessis came in, sat down on the bedside and gripped Vaugon's hand.

"Good! You're doing excellently, comrade! Tomorrow you can dress, and the day after we may hope to get away. Your wound's no great matter and we've plenty of fresh meat, and with strength coming back—"

"Has de Berville gone?" queried Vaugon.

"Yes. Just now."

Four days passed ere Vaugon and de Plessis rode forth of the Tour de Gisy, for lost strength was made up but slowly.

During these days a fierce wind storm raged, bringing no fresh snow but sweeping bare the roads of old snow and heaping it in long windrows among the trees. Of de Plessis, Vaugon saw much in this time; their rooms adjoined, they had only each other for company, and their comradeship attained to swift intimacy that had no secrets. Thus de Plessis for the first time learned how Vaugon had left the Bastille to be pitched headlong into a new identity, and of that evening at the Pinecone tavern. Vaugon, in turn, not only learned more of his present errand, but cleared up a point that had puzzled him—the time element.

"A queer comedy of errors, all of it!" mused de Plessis, staring into the fire as they talked one cold night. "This de Fleurey is a violent, headstrong man. He got into huge gambling debts, went to the money lenders, you see? Richelieu dare not turn over to him any such staggering sum, for the cardinal is too closely watched, too narrowly bayed in by enemies. Instead, Richelieu arranged a marriage with me. Even the king was forced to assent outwardly. On the fifteenth of December at latest, de Fleurey must meet his engagements; if my money lacks, Richelieu must turn elsewhere. So there you are."

"But your disappearance will raise a scandal!" said Vaugon.

De Plessis turned and gave him a queer smile.

"What of it? I've made scandals enough, through wanting to be free! Once I get to court, too, I become my own master. The king gives up his wardship. He's promised it to me, and the papers are already made out, but had to wait until this de Fleury matter blew over. Richelieu will find another rich match for him, no fear, ere the fifteenth."

"And what sort of scandals have you raised, then?" said Vaugon, smiling.

De Plessis chuckled. "Enough. Last spring that lout of a Baron de Launay, whose lands adjoin mine, thought he could grab one of my best farms. Having seigneurial rights myself, with those of high and low justice to boot, I hanged two of his bailiffs and whipped the rest of his men home. Then de Launay tried to make love to me, which was worse, and I tumbled him in the mud one day in Ste. Genevieve. After that, I joined some Rhineland pilgrims and went with them to Mont St. Michel last summer on pilgrimage and had a grand time. Things like that. Everybody thinks I'm mad! But I enjoy myself."

She did not love to play a man's part. As she admitted freely she longed for pretties, for the gewgaws and laces of a woman, but had put them away because they meant servitude to custom.

"I want no trammels; I'm a rebel," she cried passionately one day. "To do what other people think you should do, to rule your life so that nobody should look at you in holy horror—bah! That's stifling tyranny. Mind you—it's only because I'm a girl! I could get a husband, shift him off, go to Paris and act as I like. That would be all right, even if I played street courtesan! Plenty of them have done it, too. But because I'm unmarried, because I won't sell my body to gain freedom—well, some day I'll get to England or Germany, where a woman can be free and do as she likes."

"She never can anywhere," said Vaugon slowly. "None of us can, comrade."

"Your friend Cyrano can!" she flashed out, her eyes dark and stormy. "We talked about it. He can!"

"Aye, and die in the gutter like a sick dog. Ask him some day, when the mask's off. No, we can't defy the world beyond certain limits."

"Well, I shall! And that settles it."

With this, she flung away.

CHAPTER IX

OFFICER AND PRISONER

UPON one side of the royal Forest of Verrieres, a scant few leagues from Paris, was the king's pavilion and hunting lodge. Upon the other was a smaller patch of forest known as the Wood of the Hanged Wolf. Forest and wood lay just off the southern route to Versailles and were separated by a road that ran through a village. The one *auberge* of the village was, naturally, the Hanged Wolf.

Upon a brisk December afternoon a somewhat tattered cavalier on a very fine horse rode into the village from the south. Despite the fresh scar across his cheek where a bullet had broken the flesh, none who had seen that face with its fierce hawk nose and brooding liquid eyes would ever fail to recognize Cyrano de Bergerac the second time. Coming into the village, he pulled his broken plumed beaver down over his eyes, then suddenly drew his horse to a halt.

It was a Sunday, and into the open village church to the left flocked a number of folk. Three persons caught the attention of Cyrano. Beside an austere, black clad man, obviously the village notary, walked a demure and quite pretty young woman, but her eyes were neither upon her lord and master nor upon the church ahead. They were for the cloaked gallant over to one side—a very handsome young gallant who twirled his mustache with an air and who made certain cabalistic signals to which she responded very cautiously. All three filed into the church, and Cyrano loosed his reins with a chuckle.

"So, my fine d'Artagnan, at least I've run you to earth—and at your tricks again," he said. "Hm! Shows I was right; you're on the same scent. If Vaugon doubles back toward Paris, he's bound to pass here, and you're evidence that he's not yet passed. Forward, my Pegasus! Repose awaits us."

Cyrano dismounted in the innyard. The host looked very doubtful when he eyed the rider, very hopeful when he eyed the splendid horse. Cyrano chucked a gold piece into his inquiring palm.

"There's an earnest," he said. "I expect to meet friends here. One of them, M. d'Artagnan of his Majesty's guards—"

"Ah, a friend of M. le Comte d'Artagnan!" exclaimed the host, instantly thawing and bowing low. "Welcome, monsieur! He has been here for a week past. A gallant young man indeed! I have myself tended his wound."

"What? He's wounded?" asked Cyrano.

"A scratch in the left arm, a mere nothing, m'sieu, now well healing. Will you enter?"

He entered the *auberge*, which was empty. He was cold, hungry and tired. By the side of the fireplace was a small table and settle with high back and sides; in this Cyrano esconced himself, hidden from the whole room, and relaxed comfortably to warmth, ease and the dusty bottles of old Chinon placed before him. Small wonder that ten minutes later he was nodding across his table.

He wakened abruptly to voices interspersed with curses. Two men had entered and were at a table behind his settle. He gathered that one of them had received a bad fall from his horse. Presently he caught words to pique his curiosity.

"We'll have to get back to the pavilion before the king returns," said one. "We can do it by road easily."

Cyrano sniffed at this. Two of the court!

"Time enough," the other laughed. "The Grand Equerry flung from his horse—a jest for the Palais Cardinal there, eh?"

CYRANO whistled to himself. He was in the presence of Cinq Mars, then—M. le Grand, royal favorite, wastrel, greatest noble of the court. He listened with avid interest, but for some little time caught nothing definite. He was nodding again when another laugh and a question brought him wide awake.

"This new dagger, Cinq Mars—a present from a lady, eh?"

"A present for that damned cardinal!" came the snarling response. "Listen! It's all arranged for next Saturday; that's why I signaled you to ride apart with me. We can talk safely here, and arrange details on the way back. You're certain of your men? What news of Treville?"

"Hooked," came the response. "The king said this morning, in Treville's hearing, that he'd not be sorry if Richelieu were to die before Christmas. Naturally, it was easy to persuade old Treville that the king's a party to the business. It's only a question now of who'll do the thing itself."

"I'll do it myself," snapped Cinq Mars, "as I ride Richelieu's carriage. So leave that to me and attend to the other details yourself. Now, what about Chevreuse? Have you seen her?"

"Nobody's seen her," came the answer. "She was certainly in Paris, but somehow the cardinal heard of it, and his men are raking the roads. She's probably in hiding. Yet we must get word to monsieur at once, for the moment Richelieu's dead, Sedan must act."

"Enough mention of names," said Cinq Mars. "Finish your wine and we'll be off, if they've got my horse bandaged. We'll go over details on the ride back."

Presently the two departed. Cyrano untwined his stiff legs and went to the window. One of the two nobles he did not know; the other, every one in Paris knew—that young, handsome man so stamped with intolerable and passionate arrogance! Cinq Mars, indeed.

"*Mordieu!* Here's big news," thought Cyrano, returning to his table. "So Richelieu dies on Saturday, stabbed by the rascal he raised to power! I don't like that. They've tricked honest old de Treville into compliance, so he'll draw off his guards. I don't like that, either. De Treville is a good soldier. Devil take all politics and their workers!"

He began to drink, gloomily excited. If those two had known he was there, listening—whew! He would be in the Bastille quick as a coach could reach Paris.

Darkness was falling and Cyrano was lingering over the remnants of a gigantic repast when d'Artagnan swung into the place, looking considerably pleased with himself. He came to the fire, saw Cyrano sitting there and stopped short, gaping recognition. Cyrano grinned and waved his hand.

"Come, join me! A church is an excellent place to flirt with a pretty dame, but it's devilish cold. How goes the wound?"

D'Artagnan looked slightly disconcerted at this evidence of knowledge.

"Name of the fiend, how are you, de Bergerac? You're alone? Where's Vaugon?"

"Damme if I know," said Cyrano. "After that most ungodly scrimmage I found myself straggling down the road, with a bullet across the cheek to increase my beauty. Nothing but dead men and horses when I went back. No sign of Vaugon or de Plessis. That cur St. Aubin was dead as a nail, praise be to the saints! I've been wandering about ever since, and struck up this way finally."

D'Artagnan swung into a chair.

"Well, Vaugon took the chance to give me the slip," he observed. "I might have known."

"Softly, softly." Cyrano stiffened. "Haste speaks there, my friend. I'm not particularly noted for discretion, but I don't find it advisable to stroke a cat the wrong way unless my hand's gloved."

"So?"

D'Artagnan regarded him steadily, with mounting heat. The eyes of the two men met in a sharp clash of wills, the one pair darting, alert, angry, the other very steady and composed. A spark would have struck fire instantly, but Cyrano wanted no quarrel; he was too thoroughly sobered by what he had recently overheard.

"You're suspicious, and that shows a bad conscience, my friend," he said calmly. "You know well enough that I'll uphold Vaugon's honor, so why force matters? I've no intention of fighting you, upon my word, just at present. That pleasure I must reserve, for the best of reasons?"

"Yes?" D'Artagnan spoke softly, bordering upon an outburst. "And the reasons?"

Cyrano shrugged. It was false Gascon against real Gascon, shrewd wits against wits, but Cyrano had imagination to aid him.

"One's enough. For example, I'm the only disinterested person to know that on a certain day of next week, an old man in a red robe will die in a Paris street. And further, to know exactly how, by what weapon, by whose hand, at what spot, he will die!"

This shot was not slow to reach its mark and, as he comprehended what lay behind these words, d'Artagnan's eyes widened slightly.

Cyrano calmly went on finishing up his scraps, then quaffed his wine and sighed contentedly. D'Artagnan watched him sharply, with a gaze narrowed now by calculation, slow credence, astonishment. As Cyrano very well knew, this actual Gascon had a very keen eye to the main chance.

"That is to say," added Cyrano, "all this will happen unless some one intervenes with a warning. Ah, this excellent Chinon! Come, taste of it, my friend; it's the very blood of Bacchus indeed!"

D'Artagnan disregarded this urging.

"Hm!" he observed reflectively. "I heard that M. le Grand and a friend had been here this afternoon, the court being hunting in the forest. And you were devilish well hidden in that settle. Hm! It's not hard to put two and two together, Cyrano; what the devil have you chanced on, eh?"

Cyrano grinned widely. He had caught his fish, sure enough. He could see with half an eye that d'Artagnan's busy brain was already figuring what reward would be due the man who brought Richelieu warning of the plot.

"Why, for the third time I've chanced on admirable old Chinon!" he returned, and catching sight of the host, raised his voice. "Host! Another half dozen of this Chinon! That is, if M. d'Artagnan will do me the honor!"

D'Artagnan glanced at the two bottles already emptied.

"By all means," he assented, with an air of determination that was not lost on Cyrano. "By all means! And if you've left anything in the place to eat, I'll have some dinner too."

THUS was the slightly over confident M. de Batz d'Artagnan led into the resolve to drink his companion under the table and worm the secret from him, a secret which certainly held fortune for the possessor. It was an excellent resolve and had only one drawback. D'Artagnan was ignorant of the fact that he was dealing with the most gloriously dissipated young man in all Paris.

He discovered this fact for himself and awakened next day to a great forgetfulness of what had taken place. Toward noon d'Artagnan descended to the innyard, staggered to the pump and held his aching head under the stream of water forced by a grinning groom. Presently he straightened up, dried hair and face, suppressed a groan and turned bloodshot eyes upon the groom.

"M. de Bergerac has not been about yet?"

"But yes, m'sieu! Long ago. He was about quite early."

"The devil he was!" said d'Artagnan, blinking. "Get me a cup of that same wine we had last night. Where's M. de Bergerac now?"

"He rode away ten minutes ago, m'sieu, with M. Noyac, the notary. They went to look over a property M. de Bergerac was thinking of buying."

D'Artagnan's jaw dropped.

"A property? M. Noyac? What the devil's all this, eh?"

"I think he left a note for you," said the groom. "One moment, m'sieu."

Five minutes later d'Artagnan put down a beaker of Chinon with a wry grimace and fastened his astonished gaze upon a short note:

> Comrade:
>
> As we arranged last night, I shall keep M. Noyac pleasantly entertained for at least two hours, and I wish you all good luck during his absence. Be sure to carry out your part of the bargain. Until later!
>
> —CYRANO

D'Artagnan was stupefied.

"As we arranged—bargain—what the devil did we arrange? Why, this rascal knows everything. Hm! But I mistake. He's no rascal. He has every instinct of a gentleman. Two hours, eh? Come, come, no time to lose here!"

And breaking into a laugh, d'Artagnan smoothed down his hair, adjusted his blue and silver uniform scarf, called for his hat, and in five minutes was swaggering down the road to visit the notary, with whose pretty wife he had become well acquainted during his stay at the Hanged Wolf.

Later in the day, facing Cyrano across a table in the innroom, d'Artagnan solemnly lifted his flagon.

"Comrade, I drink to your newly purchased property!" he said, a twinkle in his eye. "And to—"

"The notary's wife," added Cyrano with a guffaw. "I hope you entertained her to more purpose than I did her dried up rogue of a husband! Come, I did you an excellent turn there, confess it!"

"With all my heart," said d'Artagnan, laughing. Yet, despite laughter, his manner was slightly uneasy, as his companion noted.

"So no more quips about Vaugon," said Cyrano placidly. "I fancy he got out of that cursed scrimmage and took de Plessis with him. The fog did us an ill turn that day! However, all's for the best, and the bargain we made last night settles the matter admirably."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "The precise terms of our arrangement aren't so clear as they might be."

"*Mordieu!* You've forgotten already?"

D'Artagnan flushed. Cyrano always rubbed him the wrong way. The hint of mockery in those savage black eyes rather touched his pride on the raw.

"I was drunk," he said simply. "What bargain did we make?"

Cyrano stared hard at him, then laughed.

"Faith, the one you proposed. I was to get you an hour or two with the notary's wife, and in return you were to give up your pursuit of Vaugon and not arrest him."

D'Artagnan's eyes widened, then his face became very white.

"No, no!" he said in a choked, incredulous voice. "You mistake, Cyrano!"

"Mistake?" Cyrano gaped at him in astonishment. "Not I! *Mordieu!* I've done my share, and—mistake, you say? How?"

"It's false!" cried out d'Artagnan in sudden wild indignation. "Barter my honor, my duty, for a woman? Drunk or sober, that were impossible! It's false, I say!"

Cyrano disregarded the enraged words, the challenging eyes. He knew very well that d'Artagnan spoke only the cold truth, and chuckled inwardly. This was the moment for which he had been angling.

"But," he said slowly, driving in his words, "you can see for yourself that I've carried out my end of it! And besides, I told you everything, everything! You agreed that you would ride to Paris tonight, take word to Richelieu. Pox on the whole thing! I was drunk myself, and that's the truth. You played me for a fool, eh? Well, let it pass. I'd still keep the bargain for Vaugon's sake; but you've tricked me well."

So saying, he shook his head sadly and stared down at his wine cup.

"*Cadédis!* Devil take you and Cinq Mars and your blasted secret as well!" shouted d'Artagnan furiously, starting to his feet. "I've my orders, and I'll carry them out. If you don't like it, out with your sword like a man!"

"No," said Cyrano sadly, dropping his head. "No, we've been friends, comrades, stood together. I'll not fight you now. Perhaps, when we meet again."

He stared moodily down at the table. D'Artagnan, still raging, turned and stamped out of the tavern.

LEFT alone, a sly grin broke upon Cyrano's wide mouth. The grin developed into roar upon roar of mirth, heroic laughter that came echoing back from the beams overhead, wave after wave of it. Then, quenching mirth in a deep beaker of wine, Cyrano fell to chuckling.

"More a man than I thought him, eh?" he muttered admiringly. "I had him there, had him snared and trapped, fighting against himself, and he broke out of the trap. A man indeed, and dangerous! *Mordieu!* I'll have to fight him yet. Garcon! *De quoi écuire!*"

Before him on the table were set ink and paper, quill and sand. He sharpened the quill to his taste, then wrote a very brief epistle, read it over with a nod, sanded it, folded it, called for wax and a light. Over the folded edges he dropped a blob of wax, and into this wax pressed the gold seal ring from his little finger. He looked down at the large lion *en sautoir*, the two lion skins, the chevron separating the three, and smiled slightly.

Two riders turned in from the road.

The horses were sorry hacks, skin and bones, heads adroop. Cyrano grinned at them, and grinned again at the dismounting riders—very obviously some country gentleman and his lackey, clad in queer garments that had certainly been cut under Henri Quatre a generation ago. Then the lackey touched his master's arm and pointed; they both turned and stared at the figure in the doorway. Cyrano's jaw fell. He blinked rapidly, thrust his head forward and peered at them open mouthed, then fell back against the door post as they advanced.

"A miracle!" he exclaimed, still staring. "A veritable miracle!"

"Not a bit of it," said Vaugon, putting out hand and gripping that of Cyrano. "At Igny, we heard you had passed this way and we followed."

"Eh? You heard—at Igny?" stammered Cyrano.

De Plessis laughed gaily.

"Just so, comrade, just so! We met a Norman gentleman at the inn there, with a sword thrust through the body, who reported your passing."

"Ah, that Norman!" said Cyrano and grinned. "You know what he said? That they had named a city in Canada after me, one Quebec. Because when the Normans discovered the headland where it lies, they said, '*Quel bec!*'—What a beak, eh? He thought it a fine joke until I taught him otherwise. Oh, devil take me, I'm drunk as a fool! Come in, come in, comrades! My heart's full to see you. That rascal d'Artagnan is here. You'll have to look out for him, Vaugon. Ah, what a charming lackey we have here! I don't think much of your clothes, though."

"We went to some trouble to get them." Vaugon, laughing, broke in upon the garrulous flood of words, as Cyrano led them back to his table. "A wound on your cheek, eh? I was nearly done for, but de Plessis got me away with de Berville. Well, we've got a lot to talk over, and we're half famished and frozen. By the way, we saw de Fleurey in Igny. He was there with two or three other gentlemen. I don't think he noticed either of us, but one can't always be sure."

"To the devil with him," said Cyrano. "Sit down, sit down! Host, half a dozen bottles, and get dinner on the fire! Let's get our talk out before d'Artagnan finds us. I don't like that shrewd rascal by half, let me tell you! Well, to the tale. Where have you been?"

"Wandering," said Vaugon.

THE THREE settled down, broke into rapid words, filled the gap of days with elapsed incidents. As both Cyrano and d'Artagnan had rightly reckoned, Vaugon had determined to circle around back to Paris and there hide out his appointed time. He and de Plessis had sold their fine horses, had located some old fashioned garments, and thus counted on evading any possible recognition. True, Vaugon was twice forced to show his passport, but this had gained him every help and furtherance, so obviously enough no general alarm was out for Sieur Nicolas Vaugon. It was no mere chance, but road logic, which had brought the two of them to the *auberge* of the Loup Pendu, scarce a day's ride from Paris.

Over the wine Cyrano grew confidential to a certain degree. He told of having overheard a plot against Richelieu, but gave no details of it and he drew forth the letter he had written, without superscription. He flung it at Vaugon.

"Here, take this. I give it to you. Get that into Richelieu's hands before Friday night. You've all week. You have the secret in your pocket, I have it in my head."

"But, man alive!" broke out Vaugon, astonished. "This is your affair."

"It's your affair," said Cyrano stubbornly. "Your head's looser than mine, comrade! We'll go back to Paris together, but in case of accidents we're prepared—you comprehend?"

A flush mounting in his face, Vaugon threw down the letter angrily.

"Prepared to give the red cardinal warning? Not I! Be damned if I do! Let him be killed and good riddance. The quicker they put a bullet or knife into him, the sooner France is safe for me. Warning, warning—damned if I do!"

"Damned if you don't," said Cyrano, with a weary gesture, as of one who must explain to a fool.

Vaugon sensed a stubborn steel will in the man's gaze.

"What business is it of yours?" he snapped. "Why should you—"

"Tut, tut!" Cyrano emptied his wine cup, gave de Plessis a glance. "Comrade, should we warn him or not, eh? What's your advice?"

"Mine?" The girl's eyes widened. "I'm no friend to Richelieu. And yet—assassination—"

"Just so," mimicked Cyrano, with a great gust of laughter. "Assassination! My instincts of a gentleman rebel—my instincts of a grandsire fishmonger!"

"Stop your cursed satiric tone and get sober," growled Vaugon, irresolute. The swarthy hook nosed face thrust toward him across the table.

"Sober? All right! Do I love Richelieu? Bah! You're a fool, Vaugon, a fool! I'd not warn him for love of him, either. Still, I've got enough common sense to use a sword that's put into my hand, haven't I?" His fingers tapped at the folded letter. "There's a sword, a key, a weapon, a what you like! Get it into Richelieu's hands, and your pardon is—"

"Damn Richelieu! He's nothing to pardon me for," cried out Vaugon furiously. "I'll ask nothing from him! I'll go to the king, yes, and I'll keep the name given me, and get a royal warrant."

"Yes, I said you're a fool," Cyrano grimaced. "Get this letter to Richelieu, then, as Sieur Nicolas Vaugon! Vaugon, surely, has nothing against the cardinal! Touched you there, eh? All your prating of a dead past, eh? Well, well, look at it this way! Richelieu's a great man. I admire him, respect him. I'm not a gentleman, but I don't like to see him knifed in the gutter by a cowardly little devil who's afraid to face him openly."

Vaugon flushed again, this time with abrupt shame.

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps."

"Looks different from that angle?" Cyrano grinned. "Sensible man. Why despise a gift of the gods? Whoever gets that letter to Richelieu, his fortune's made. We'll manage it. I don't love the red cardinal, but I don't like this dirty knife method of killing. Besides, they seem to have tricked old de Treville—his guards will probably—well, no matter. You have the thing there. Use it as the chance comes."

"Next Saturday. That's the fifteenth of the month," said de Plessis, violet eyes wide.

"And a lot can happen in the four days between," said Vaugon, turning over the letter in his hand. "In case—"

He looked up to see d'Artagnan standing there watching him. He half rose, hand outstretched, but d'Artagnan only bowed slightly.

"I regret that I must obey my instructions, M. Vaugon," he said. "I arrest you in the king's name."

With a bellow Cyrano swung to his feet, gripping at his sword. But behind and around d'Artagnan were the host, two grooms and two scullions from the kitchen, all of them armed. Before Cyrano could draw blade, Vaugon's hand checked him.

"Wait, Cyrano! You mean this arrest, M. d'Artagnan?"

"I do," said d'Artagnan in a firm yet somewhat gloomy voice. "I was ordered to arrest you when any dispatches were given or received. Our comradeship is ended, Vaugon. I must do my duty. You can not escape."

Vaugon smiled.

"My dear d'Artagnan, I have no intention of escaping, I assure you! That is, provided your orders have nothing to do with M. de Plessis or M. de Bergerac."

"Nothing," said d'Artagnan. "They concern you alone."

His attitude was inflexible, cold, stern. Vaugon smiled again and held out his hand.

"No blame to a gentleman who does his duty, d'Artagnan! Will you join us?"

"Thank you, no." D'Artagnan shook hands, then stepped back. "We must have an understanding here and now, if you please. Ride with me in the morning. I accept your parole. Eh?"

"Done," said Vaugon. "I give you my word I'll ride with you in the morning, but I don't say that I'll accompany you to Paris."

"In which case, I'll ask for your sword and pistols before we leave."

"Agreed."

"Touching those dispatches, I must ask you for them."

THERE was a little silence. Vaugon was not aware of what had preceded his arrival, but perceived something was in the air. Cyrano sensed instantly that d'Artagnan knew exactly what was in the letter, had taken this means of obtaining it. He broke into a laugh, half of amusement, half of scorn, and under this laugh d'Artagnan reddened deeply.

"Dispatches? You mean the letter Cyrano just gave me?" said Vaugon. "Hm! Your orders are to arrest me, bring me with my dispatches to Richelieu? Very well. The letter stays in my pocket. When you bring me to Richelieu, I give it to him. Agreed?"

At this, Cyrano chuckled delightedly.

D'Artagnan was furious, but checkmated; he bit his lip, bowed, motioned the tavern host and servants to withdraw. The three at the table found themselves alone, staring one at another.

"*Mordieu!* You blocked him there," exclaimed Cyrano, then sobered. "But, Vaugon, this is utter mad folly! It's useless! There's not even a highway tavern until you reach Chatillon and there he can get guards. He'll do it, too. You mean for me to set out ahead, lay in wait, and take care of this shrewd rascal?"

"No, no!" Vaugon laughed, and met the anxious eyes of de Plessis merrily. "You and our friend here leave ahead of us, by all means. I place de Plessis in your care, Cyrano. Go on to Paris, and we'll make rendezvous at the Pinecone, if you like."

"Eh?" Cyrano gaped at him. "But if you let this rogue arrest you—"

Vaugon chuckled.

"Come, have faith! You'll make a brief stay in Chatillon, arrange certain things. Then go on, and leave the rest to me. The safety of de Plessis is all important, remember."

"It's not!" broke out the girl abruptly. "Vaugon, I won't have this! You can't give yourself up in order to save me!"

"I don't intend to," said Vaugon with such meaning that they were half convinced. "Cyrano, take orders from me, and all will go happily. Do you agree?"

"Yes, if you insist," said Cyrano, frowning. "But I don't like it. I tell you this Gascon is a shrewd little fox. Here he comes back again. What now?"

D'Artagnan approached them alone.

"Sieur Vaugon," he asked, "would it suit you to ride at nine in the morning?"

"Certainly," said Vaugon. "And I'll give you my parole as far as Chatillon."

"Agreed. You haven't secured a room here yet? I believe they're rather scarce." For an instant d'Artagnan's eye went to de Plessis. "There's only one other, in fact. Perhaps you'll consent to share mine for the night and de Plessis can take the extra one?"

Vaugon assented, despite Cyrano's narrowed gaze, for he was far from guessing the exact reason for this request, and laid it to d'Artagnan's delicacy. He might much better have laid it to d'Artagnan's sagacity, for the young guardsman was already thinking of the queries that would certainly be asked at the Palais Cardinal.

"Come," said Vaugon warmly, "sit down, d'Artagnan, join us, forget that anything lies between us."

"Impossible, monsieur." D'Artagnan bowed stiffly. "We are and must be, I regret to say, officer and prisoner."

Cyrano came to his feet with a growling oath.

"When we meet in Paris, M. d'Artagnan, you and I will have a very prompt settlement. Do you understand?"

D'Artagnan's mustache quivered with concealed rage as he regarded the other.

"I shall be honored to cross swords with you, M. de Bergerac," he returned formally, "when I do not happen to be on duty." And with another bow, he swung loftily away and disappeared into the innyard.

"You'll learn something when you do!" murmured Cyrano. "Impudent puppy, trying to impress us with your damned sense of duty! I know you better."

Vaugon laughed and pulled Cyrano down into his chair.

"Sit down; listen to orders! If I leave at nine in the morning, you and de Plessis leave at eight. And I promise you a swift and sharp revenge on our friend yonder, if you listen carefully."

Cyrano listened.

CHAPTER X

THE KING'S PASSPORT

D'ARTAGNAN and Vaugon broke their fast together. The guardsman made no comment upon the departure of Cyrano and de Plessis; in fact, he said very little until the host had been paid and they were pulling on hats and cloaks. Then he looked at Vaugon frankly.

"I'm sorry for this," he said impulsively. "I know the cardinal's in error; that's not my business. You're no woman. He'll never know from me who you really are, though."

Vaugon put out his hand with a smile.

"Good! I never doubted you, d'Artagnan. Last night—"

"De Bergerac and I don't get on, that's all." D'Artagnan shrugged.

"We're friends to Chatillon; there, we become officer and prisoner. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" said d'Artagnan.

They were halfway to Chatillon when Vaugon, glancing back from a slight eminence along the straight, snow bordered road, uttered a low word.

"Look!"

D'Artagnan turned, saw three horses spurring hard behind them, and nodded.

"Three of them, two of us," said Vaugon quietly. "If you prefer, give me my sword."

"No!" Pride mantled the other's cheek darkly. "*Cadédis*, no! I'm on my rights here!"

Vaugon shrugged and they rode on.

"*Holá!*" rang the sharp shout from behind. "Messieurs!"

D'Artagnan shrugged, drew rein, turned his horse. He awaited cool, impervious, stern, fully dominant. De Fleurey, his foam flecked horse well in advance of the other two, came on at a gallop and drew rein impetuously, his eager angry gaze on Vaugon.

"So I've caught you!" he cried out. "Your pardon, M. d'Artagnan, I have business with this gentleman."

D'Artagnan's horse barred the way.

"Does your business supersede mine, M. de Fleurey?" he asked.

"Name of the devil, it does, whatever yours may be!" cried de Fleurey hotly. "Do you know that this rascal ran away with Mlle. de Closset? Do you know?"

The other two cavaliers came up, reined in, drowned his speech.

"I think you mistake," said d'Artagnan. He was very polite, very formal. He held the center of the stage completely and was thoroughly enjoying himself. By the attitude of de Fleurey's two companion's, he shrewdly judged they were irresolute, and he took his own course accordingly. "This gentleman is Sieur Vaugon."

"Exactly!" cried de Fleurey, his strong, dark features convulsed by rage. "Sieur Vaugon! Sieur Nobody, blast him! He must answer to me here and now."

"Softly, softly," interposed d'Artagnan. "Gentlemen, I call you to witness that Sieur Vaugon is under arrest. He is a prisoner in my charge, and I am responsible for his safety. I have my duty."

"To the devil with your duty!" stormed de Fleurey.

His companions attempted to intervene, but with a snarled oath he swept them aside and brought up his horse close to that of d'Artagnan. Passionate fury had him in its grip.

"You know who I am, monsieur?" he exclaimed menacingly. "Stand back out of my way! I'll become answerable here. His Eminence—"

"Monsieur," said d'Artagnan with cold and excessive politeness, "I receive orders only from the king or his minister. In this instance, my orders are from his eminence in person, and are very precise. I advise you not to interfere with—"

"Damn your advice and you too!" raged de Fleurey in headstrong fury. "Do you think I've been coursing the roads the past week for nothing? Not a bit of it. I've run down the quarry and I mean to see it through. M. Vaugon, where is the lady? Answer, you dog!"

Vaugon had no intention of intervening. It was d'Artagnan's game to play. He only smiled in silence, and before this smile de Fleurey completely lost his head. He leaned out and struck d'Artagnan across the face.

"Will you stand back, you cursed young fool?"

D'ARTAGNAN slipped from the saddle.

"You are witnesses to these insults, gentlemen," he said calmly. "Since you have a sword, M. de Fleurey, perhaps you are not afraid to use it?"

De Fleurey dismounted swiftly enough, appearing to have quite recovered from the wound he had received at Vaugon's hand. Once again his companions protested, but he flung them aside savagely and whipped out his rapier. They, it seemed, were more than dismayed by his passionate rage, knowing he had pushed things too far, and they displayed no intention of molesting Vaugon. The latter received his sword back from d'Artagnan and waited, motionless.

"*En garde*, puppy!" snarled Fleurey, flinging himself to the attack with a vicious and determined anger.

Smiling slightly, d'Artagnan received the assault with perfect ease. From the outset, Vaugon perceived there could be but one ending, for the younger man was absolutely cool, perfectly master of himself and of his weapon, while the other, panting forth oaths and threats in headlong anger, was fighting recklessly and not well. Fleurey, indeed, hurled himself in, time and again, with bursts of blind fury, wore himself out and effected nothing. His foot slipped, he came to one knee. D'Artagnan lowered his point and spoke sharply.

"Wait! I beg of you, M. de Fleurey, consider what you're doing."

Fleurey's steel drove up at him—an unexpected, vicious lunge from the ground. The point touched, barely broke the skin on d'Artagnan's neck; then, furious, he flung himself forward and for the first time attacked. Before the dazzling mastery of this assault, Fleurey was all but helpless. No more waiting now, no more hesitation. His face set in pitiless lines, d'Artagnan lunged, lunged again, drove home a sudden blow, stood waiting.

Fleurey, pierced through the heart, collapsed and was dead ere he fell to earth.

"Gentlemen, I ask you to witness what happened," said d'Artagnan, panting a little.

The two others bowed. They had dismounted, were stooping over the dead man.

"Fleurey is a relative of the cardinal," said Vaugon. "Now you're in for trouble!"

"Ah! I know our cardinal. What's the nub of it all? Duty is duty! That's exactly why I took the attitude I did. Punish me for it? Not Richelieu! He'll give me my guardsman's cassock! I'll tell him about it myself. He's no petty man, this cardinal. I'll take the risk, because it's a safe gamble."

Vaugon whistled. Shrewd calculation, daring, bold, but probably safe enough!

"Well," he said with a laugh, "I owe you thanks. Name of the devil! You've done us all a tremendous good turn in ridding us of Fleurey! Upon my word, I fell sorry for what I must do!"

"Eh?" D'Artagnan shot a look at him. "What you must do?"

"You'll see." Vaugon shrugged. "I regret it, my friend, but never mind. Is that Chatillon ahead?"

D'Artagnan nodded rather uneasily at sight of the towers. Vaugon's words perturbed him and he probed his companion with sharp glances.

The town opened out before them, an hour before midday. When they came to the market square before the church, it was crammed with folk, for market was in full swing; the square and the streets around were not easy of passage.

"Unless you renew your parole," said d'Artagnan, "I must obtain guards here."

"There are guards now, if I'm not mistaken." Vaugon gestured to a number of soldiers regulating the crowded traffic ahead, an officer in command of them.

"As you like," said d'Artagnan. "Ah, the provost's guard—the provost himself!"

The provost himself, as his gold chain and stick indicated, held up his hand to them with an order to halt, and his men closed the open lane.

"Who are you, messieurs?" he demanded curtly. D'Artagnan was about to speak, when Vaugon pushed out his horse and extended his passport.

"In the king's name, I demand aid, monsieur; this gentleman has arrested me without cause and without papers."

For an instant d'Artagnan was speechless with amazement; then an oath broke from him and he started to speak rapidly.

The provost, who had taken the passport, checked him.

"In your turn, monsieur, in your turn! One moment, please."

D'Artagnan bit his lip, flung one angry look at Vaugon and waited. The provost read over the passport and returned it to Vaugon with a low bow.

"Sieur Vaugon, I salute the orders of his Majesty. I was advised of your coming. Now, monsieur of the guard, what is all this?"

"This gentleman is my prisoner," said d'Artagnan. "As you can see, I am of his Majesty's guards. I demand free passage and two cavaliers to escort us to Paris."

The provost smiled.

"I have every respect for his Majesty's guards, monsieur, but still more respect for his Majesty's signature. You have, no doubt, a written order of arrest?"

"I have not," said d'Artagnan, seeing now in what trap he was fallen. He was white with rage and despair, utterly helpless. "I warn you that—"

"Save your warning, monsieur," said the provost calmly. He turned to Vaugon. "Under the royal seal, Sieur Vaugon, you have only to ask what you like. Is it your pleasure that I arrest this gentleman?"

Vaugon looked at d'Artagnan, the white despair of the guardsman's face, and his sense of triumph died out at once. Cyrano had managed things well, and Vaugon felt sorry for d'Artagnan in this moment.

"Not at all, monsieur," he returned. "M. d'Artagnan has exceeded his orders only through too great zeal. Let us speak together for a moment, and I think he'll admit the fact."

The provost assented. Vaugon brought his horse beside that of d'Artagnan and took out the sealed letter Cyrano had given him.

He had already guessed that the letter was anonymous, though Cyrano had not said as much. As a warning it would be no less effective.

"MY FRIEND, we owe each other something," Vaugon said. "Here's the paper Cyrano gave me; I haven't read it, but he stated that it contained details of a plot and must be given into the hand of Richelieu. You know about it? Then take it and deliver it."

D'Artagnan's chagrin, which had been bitter enough, melted before these words.

"You're too generous, Vaugon!" he said hoarsely. "No."

"Take it." Vaugon smiled as he extended the letter. "My dear fellow, you're helpless against this passport. This warning will save the day for you."

"I accept, then, with thanks." D'Artagnan took the missive. "But why should you send this to him?"

Vaugon shrugged.

"Not from any love of our cardinal, I assure you! By all logic, I should burn the letter and let fate take its course. Bah! Cyrano was right. Why despise such a gift of the gods? Here's a valuable thing. Use it, then! I'd not use it myself, I tell you frankly. Let the red minister die tomorrow, for all of me!"

"Very well. Then avoid Paris," said d'Artagnan. "You'll be lost if you go on. The chances are that the cardinal will have your passport annulled and will order me to get you, even if I tell him you gave me the warning—"

"Eh? Don't you dare!" snapped Vaugon angrily. "Don't dare tell him that. I'll deny it! Devil take him for all of me, I'll ask nothing from him! As for going on to Paris, never fear. Do me one favor, and we'll be quits. Tell Mazarin about it, tell him I have urgent need of the other document which he holds, the one signed by the king, and leave matters to him. Do this in friendship and send the document to me at the Pinecone. Do what must be done in duty, and don't worry. Agreed?"

"With all my heart!"

D'Artagnan's face brightened. His hand went out and he gave Vaugon a strong, warm grip.

"I hope we don't meet again. I hope I don't have to arrest you a second time, comrade! Be advised, then. Don't come to Paris, but make quickly for England before that passport is annulled."

Vaugon shook his head.

"No. It's win or lose all, d'Artagnan. Good luck, and don't turn over that letter to Mazarin."

"I'm not that much of a fool. Farewell, comrade."

"D'Artagnan turned his horse and saluted the provost.

"Monsieur, I have released my prisoner from arrest. Have I your permission to ride on?"

At a nod from Vaugon the provost ordered his men to open ranks, and d'Artagnan drove in his spurs and was gone on the road to Paris.

HALF an hour later, after a quick meal, Vaugon followed. He rode slowly, unhurried, content to reach Paris after dark; the passport would still serve to give him entrance, for not until the following day at least would it be annulled. And as he jogged on, he smiled again at thought of the scene in Chatillon.

"Odd that d'Artagnan forgot the little detail of that passport!" he reflected. "He ran slap into the snare. Well, he's a good fellow enough, and I'm glad I gave him that warning letter. Richelieu will easily enough pardon him for not bringing me in, after that! Yet if he and Cyrano meet, fur will certainly fly; those two don't like each other. What a swordsman this d'Artagnan is, too! Cyrano had best look to his laurels if they do meet."

So the heights of Chatillon fell behind, and he rode on toward Montrouge and Paris, and had only a league left ahead when he came upon a cavalier sitting his horse beneath a wide oak tree, whose scant brown leaves whistled in the wind. The cavalier, muffled to the eyes in a tattered cloak, pushed out to meet him.

"Your passport, monsieur!" cried a mocking voice, and Vaugon's jaw fell as he recognized de Berville.

"You!" he exclaimed, astonished. "By what magic?"

"By force of circumstances, like yourself, no doubt." De Berville broke into a ringing laugh. "Well met! Whence come you? Where are our friends?"

Vaugon made no immediate answer, but looked steadily at the man. Evidently, de Berville knew nothing of Cyrano, de Plessis, or d'Artagnan passing by this road today.

"Safe," he said presently. "You were not waiting here for me?"

"Don't flatter yourself." And de Berville made a wry grimace; he looked oddly drawn and weary. "I'm about at the last gasp and waiting for help. If it doesn't come within half an hour, as promised, then his Eminence will be a merry man tonight! Well, well, you're still angry at me, my Montmorenci?"

Vaugon's eyes were cold.

"My dear de Berville, or monsieur, or whoever the devil you are," he said, "I don't like your pleasantry. There is no Montmorenci alive. I've warned you for the last time."

He picked up his reins to ride on, when de Berville flung back his head and laughed.

"But the joke of it is, my dear Montmorenci—"

Vaugon was stung by the words, by the manner of them, by the laugh. He reached out suddenly and took de Berville by the throat in no gentle grip. Before his cold anger, de Berville's blue eyes went wide with fright; then, unexpectedly, the man fell forward in a dead faint.

Instantly contrite, Vaugon cursed his own irritation, dismounted, carried de Berville off the road to the clear ground beneath the oak. After all, he owed this man much; it had been petty of him to so vent his dislike. Why, the poor devil must have been at the very point of exhaustion! Vaugon got a flask of cognac from his saddlebag, poured some between the pallid lips, began to chafe the jeweled, slim hands, opened de Berville's collar. . .

AFTER a moment he doubled up his cloak, put it under de Berville's head and came to his feet. He was speechless, gripped by utter amazement. Mechanically he looked back along the road, saw a clump of horsemen coming along, and got his two horses over under the oak. Then he stood looking down, wonder in his eyes. For de Berville was no man, but woman.

When those blue eyes opened Vaugon knelt and helped the other to sit up.

"Your pardon," he said gently. "I did not know, madame—or mademoiselle—"

"Did I faint? Oh! So you know now, eh?"

De Berville came erect with an effort, looked at Vaugon with a quick laugh, quite without any embarrassment. Vaugon nodded.

"Yes. I never suspected. Once more I ask your pardon."

De Berville's hand came out warmly to his.

"Ah, no need, my friend! There's no—" Into de Berville's face came a rush of color, the blue eyes sparkled. "Look, look! They've come at last—they got the word—"

"Welcome, welcome, my friends!" she cried eagerly. "Let me present to you a very dear friend and comrade, Sieur Vaugon. And now, leave us for a little moment, then I'll ride with you!"

They bowed, one and all, and Vaugon saw they were gentlemen, nobles, no mere road runners, but men of position. They withdrew, and de Berville turned.

"And you never guessed!" she exclaimed, putting out both hands to him. "I'm Marie de Chevreuse, comrade. Where's de Plessis?"

The Duchess de Chevreuse—ah! Vaugon colored a little as he bowed above her fingers. He might have guessed, yes.

"Gone to Paris with Cyrano, your highness," he said. "De Fleurey is dead—"

"Dead! Ah!" She caught her breath, then cried out swiftly. "Good! Then come with us. We ride to Sedan, out of France! Come, my friend. The princes are there; I'll be there, and we're comrades, all of us. I guarantee you protection, alliance, restoration of your name and rights."

"Stop, stop!" exclaimed Vaugon, for the moment confused, dazzled.

Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse, confidante of the queen, sworn enemy of Richelieu, exiled, unscrupulous, the most beautiful and most licentious woman of her age—she was de Berville.

"You can't go to Paris," she hurried on. "That would be suicide. Join us! We'll make Issy, cross the Seine by the Passy bridge, circle around to Montmartre and be clear of Paris before we halt tonight. And ahead waits everything—rank, friends, safety. And I'll tell you a secret—you, comrade! What not a dozen people know—"

Vaugon scarce heard her. A secret! She was in the plot, then. The thought stabbed at him. Her voice pierced to him again, woke him.

". . . all arranged, comrade! I've won over Sarmiento, governor of the Low Countries. Spanish troops aid us. Guyenne will rise in revolt. The Comte de Soissons raises the standard at Sedan, and with us are all the princes; the army is gathering."

"Montmorenci is dead, dear madame," he said; and his gray eyes were very clear and serene as he met her gaze. "Your secret is safe with me. Nicolas Vaugon lives, and goes to Paris. I thank you for your offer, for your friendship."

"In the devil's name, don't be a fool!" she cried sharply. "Why this folly?"

"De Plessis might ask that."

Vaugon smiled. She comprehended instantly.

"You're in love with that wench—then you're done for, fool."

Vaugon shrugged.

"I win or lose all, madame, for Nicolas Vaugon."

Chevreuse leaned forward impetuously, caught him by the shoulders, embraced him.

"Farewell, fool—glorious fool!" she exclaimed, and turned to the waiting party. "To horse, gentlemen, for Sedan!"

CHAPTER XI

D'ARTAGNAN DELIVERS A LETTER

THE OLD lion of France was wasting slowly and, like many ill men, he was not to be lightly thwarted or faced with any tale of failure. Richelieu did not forgive failure. The slow disease that consumed him, draining his body of blood, had but one end.

"Who?" Richelieu looked up from his work-table with a frown, as Mazarin murmured a word in his ear. "M. d'Artagnan, oh! Yes, yes, at once. Wait—is he alone?"

"Alone, Monseigneur," lisped the Italian.

A savage gleam shot through the eyes of Richelieu and he gestured silently as he relaxed on his cushions.

D'Artagnan had received warnings enough on his way through the anterooms, and as he spoke with Mazarin. Now, as he entered and saluted, he seemed to gather himself, summon up every atom of his native shrewdness, for he faced emergency.

"You may retire, monsignor," said Richelieu to Mazarin, who bowed and withdrew. "Well, M. d'Artagnan? It is evident that I am getting old and losing my memory. As I recalled the matter, I ordered you not to return alone."

"Your Eminence is quite correct," said d'Artagnan, with perfect self possession and he even smiled slightly as he met the savage gaze. "I have the honor to believe that I was sent on this errand for two reasons; first, because I knew Sieur Vaugon by sight, second, because I possess a certain intelligence."

"A cadet of the guards can display only one sign of intelligence—to obey orders. You were sent to arrest this Vaugon."

"I arrested him, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan coolly.

"Eh? Then you found him?" The shaggy gray brows went up. "Are you jesting with me, monsieur?"

"I would not so presume, your Eminence. I take for granted you are not interested in the reasons for failure."

Richelieu made an impatient gesture.

"If you arrested him, why is he not here?"

"Because his passport, signed by the king, enabled him to call upon any royal officer for aid. This morning at Chatillon, he made that demand of the provost, who obeyed."

The cardinal's lip curved sardonically.

"This is what you term intelligence, M. d'Artagnan?"

"By no means, Monseigneur. When this mission was confided to me, your Eminence made certain remarks which led me to believe this Sieur Vaugon was a woman."

"Well?"

"That, Monseigneur, was not the case."

Richelieu struck his bell. Mazarin entered, almost too quickly.

"That report concerning Mlle. de Closset—where is it?"

"Instantly, Monseigneur."

Within ten seconds, indeed, Mazarin laid a paper in Richelieu's hand, gave d'Artagnan one glance and withdrew again. Richelieu looked at the paper.

"This Sieur Vaugon," he said harshly, "was no other than Mme. de Chevreuse in disguise. Vaugon came to the Chateau de Closset one evening, departed almost at once, and next morning Mlle. de Closset rode away and joined him."

"She is now in Paris, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan.

The cardinal looked up.

"You know that? How?"

"I have been with her and with Vaugon for some time, Monseigneur. I can assure you with the utmost certainty that Vaugon is no woman disguised, but a man."

"Hm!" Richelieu frowned, his eyes very sharp. "How can you be certain?"

"Only last night, your Eminence, we shared the same room at the inn of the Loup Pendu, after I had arrested Sieur Vaugon."

Richelieu stared hard for a moment, as if weighing this statement.

"Hm! And de Fleurey fought a duel with him at Berny. Perhaps, perhaps! If a man, then who could he be?"

"Your Eminence, he assured me that he was really Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

"No such person exists. Well, no matter! So he was not Chevreuse—yet she's been reported in France. You say Mlle. de Closset is now in Paris?"

"So I believe, your Eminence. Unfortunately, I met with interference on the road this morning. You will recall, undoubtedly, my orders to keep Sieur Vaugon unharmed—"

"M. d'Artagnan—" and Richelieu's eye flashed—"tell me instantly what you have to say, and no more beating around the bush. Out with it!"

D'Artagnan bowed. He told of the meeting with de Fleurey, and of how it had ended. Richelieu made no sign, except that the lines about his mouth grew deeper.

"You killed him, and you boast to me of it!" he said, a flush mounting his pale cheek.

"No, your Eminence." D'Artagnan showed the fresh scar at his throat. "I defended myself and my prisoner, as was my duty."

"Duty! You cub of a cadet, to prate of duty!"

"To France, your Eminence!"

The sharp, pregnant words drove home. For a moment the eyes of the two men held in a strange conflict, then Richelieu nodded.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked sharply.

"I arrested Vaugon in order to secure a letter in his possession. Your Eminence was explicit in wishing any documents seized." D'Artagnan produced the epistle, which bore no superscription. "I believe this letter to be of the utmost importance to France, Monseigneur, and that in the light of my highest duty—"

"Give it to me," said Richelieu, holding out his thin, slender hand.

HE TOOK the letter, regarded the wax seal with a slight frown, tore it open and held the writing to the light. As he read, he changed countenance; a sudden, alert gleam shone in his eyes and his thin lips tightened. Slowly every particle of color drained out of his face. With an effort, he rose, thrust the letter inside his soutane and began to pace up and down before the fire, eyes on the floor, forgetful of the guardsman.

D'Artagnan caught these signs of agitation very complacently. He was certain that Cyrano had there jotted down details of the plot against Richelieu in order that Vaugon might give them to the cardinal; since he, not Vaugon, had presented them, everything was for the best.

Had he been aware of the shabby trick fate was playing him in that letter he would not have been so confident.

"*Vae solis!*" murmured Richelieu, almost sadly. "Woe to him who stands alone; and am I so alone, then? So Cinq Mars would dare thus far! If—" He checked himself, halted, drove a sharp look at the guardsman.

"Are you aware of the contents of this paper, M. d'Artagnan?"

"Not of its precise contents, your Eminence. Only of its purport."

Richelieu regarded him for a long moment.

"Do you know where this Vaugon is at the moment?"

"In Paris, I believe. He spoke of coming on here alone."

"Describe him to me minutely, if you please."

D'Artagnan was more than a little astonished at the minister's sharp interest in Vaugon at such a moment, and at receiving no word of thanks for the warning; however, he obeyed the command. Richelieu started suddenly and interrupted.

"Wait! Has he a small mole, triangular in shape, just before one ear?"

D'Artagnan frowned.

"I believe so—yes, he has."

"So!" An expression of amazement came into Richelieu's face, then was gone. He tapped his bell, sank into his chair and gathered up his robe about his knees. Mazarin entered and bowed.

"A blank order of arrest, if you please."

Mazarin went to a secretary, opened it and produced a form already signed by the king and minister, which he brought to the table. Richelieu looked up at him.

"M. de Fleurey was killed today on the Chatillon road."

"On the Chatillon road, your Eminence—M. de Fleurey—"

"Exactly," said Richelieu. "Two unknown gentlemen were with him, easily enough found. Obtain an exact report from them. See that all arrangements are made for M. de Fleurey's funeral. Consult with Mme. d'Aiguillon regarding it and notify me."

"At once, Excellentissime Signor," said Mazarin, with another bow.

On the table lay the edges of paper bearing the seal from the letter, which Richelieu had torn off. He picked up the wax fragment and extended it.

"If possible, discover to whom these arms belong. Kindly send Chavigny to me."

Mazarin withdrew, and in a moment Chavigny entered the room.

"Ah!" said Richelieu. "You've heard of de Fleurey's death?"

Chavigny assented gloomily.

"Mlle. de Closset," went on the cardinal's dry voice, "has defied the king's wishes, and by her disobedience has caused much trouble. Have an order in council issued tomorrow, declaring her entire properties forfeit to the state; it must be signed and put into execution before tomorrow night—an important point, for within a few days she ceases to be a royal ward."

Again Chavigny assented silently and was dismissed with a gesture. Richelieu leaned over the table, dipped a quill, and wrote a few words on the blank order of arrest. He handed it and shoved it toward d'Artagnan.

"This will serve to annul the precious passport of our friend Sieur Vaugon," he said, and gave the guardsman a long look. "You are a very shrewd young man, M. d'Artagnan," and now the suavity of his voice concealed a sarcastic note. "You believe in carrying out your duty at all costs, eh?"

"Yes, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan.

Impassive as he appeared, he could not help glancing at the order of arrest on the table. When he saw not his own name but that of Vaugon, he exhaled a slight breath of relief. He now knew there was something very peculiar about Cyrano's letter and cursed himself for not having slid a hot knife under the seal and examined that letter before its delivery.

"You are hereby empowered to arrest Sieur Vaugon and bring him to me, this order taking precedence of any previous order or act—over his Majesty's signature and mine." He extended the paper, and d'Artagnan took it with a bow. "You have until tomorrow night to gain either a cassock or a cell, monsieur."

"I choose the cassock, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan, with an effort at lightness.

"So you said before, I think. Hm! My tragedy of Rachel is to be performed at the Luxembourg tomorrow evening; later, I attend the ball at the Louvre and sup with the king—yes, time enough. Attention, monsieur! The performance ends at eight-thirty. At precisely eight-forty my carriage will be in the courtyard below here; I shall remain in the carriage. I expect you to present Sieur Vaugon to me at that time. I must see myself if he is the man I think him to be. You fully understand?"

"Fully, your Eminence." D'Artagnan bowed and so departed.

"Poor Vaugon!" thought the guardsman as he left the room. "This time Richelieu has certainly placed him aright. Well, I warned him! Now he goes back to the Bastille, and no escape either."

IN THE ante-chamber, where a number of people awaited audience, d'Artagnan saw Mazarin make a slight gesture. He followed through other rooms until they were along behind a closed door.

"You can find M'sou Vaugon, then?"

"Unluckily, I can and I must," said d'Artagnan frankly. "At least, I know where to look. Now, where is the paper he asked from you—with the king's signature?"

"By the way, m'sou, did you not bring some sort of letter to his Eminence—a letter bearing a seal in red wax!"

"Why, yes, a letter of a personal nature, with some rather interesting information," he rejoined lightly. "Come, M. Mazarin! You find the paper Vaugon wants, and I'll tell you what was in the letter to his Eminence. Word of honor. Agreed?"

Mazarin seemed not to hear. He was exploring a pocket, and upon his smooth swarthy features came a look of astonishment.

"Hold, hold, a hole in this pocket!" he exclaimed. "And, upon my word, a paper—if by any chance—yes, it is! The very one! Ah, what good luck, M. d'Artagnan! But you were about to say something?"

He glanced at the paper in his hand, then looked at d'Artagnan, who smothered a curse.

"Why, yes! This letter related the details of a plot against his Eminence—a plot in which M. le Grand is the leading actor. Is that satisfactory?"

For one swift instant a mortal pallor swept across the sleek visage of the Italian. And this told d'Artagnan everything, told him that Mazarin not only knew of the plot, but was probably concerned in it very vitally. Then, forcing a smile, Mazarin thrust the paper into the guardsman's hand.

MAZARIN, meanwhile, made his way back through the antechambers, spoke to one and another, and waited until Richelieu was alone. Then he entered the cardinal's presence and laid on the table the wax seal from Cyrano's letter.

"Monseigneur," he said softly, "I was just given a message from that soothsayer in Rue Monge, the Sardinian who tells fortunes. He sent word that on no account must you go to the Louvre on Saturday next or take part in the reception of the English ambassador."

Richelieu gave him a sharp, startled glance.

"I do not deal with soothsayers, M. de Mazarin," he said dryly and struck his bell. "Wait, if you please. Send Chavigny."

In a moment Chavigny entered the room.

"Change the orders," said Richelieu. "Request, instead, that the company of M. des Essarts be assigned to duty here on Saturday."

Chavigny bowed and withdrew. Richelieu took up the wax seal.

"And this, M. de Mazarin?"

There was a malignant, swiftly shaded glitter in the dark eyes of the Italian as he came forward.

"These arms, Monseigneur, are borne without any right by a gentleman of the guards, company of Carbon. His name is Savinien de Cyrano, or de Bergerac. He is a Parisian by birth and family, though he is commonly taken for a Gascon."

Mazarin had made quick, sharp work of his investigation.

"Yes?" murmured Richelieu, looking at the seal. "This is very singular."

"It was this de Bergerac," purred Mazarin, "who accompanied the mysterious Sieur Vaugon on his visit to the Carmelites, when a certain lady was interviewed."

"Ah!" Richelieu looked up suddenly. "*Sa Majesté?*"

"*Sa Majesté,*" assented Mazarin. "This de Bergerac is known as a most dissipated character, a roistering poet, a duelist who makes rhymes as he fights."

"Ballads?" asked Richelieu dryly.

"His duels never last long enough for ballads, Eminent Signor; he is forced to make rondels or triolets, I believe, since he invariably kills his man within a few moments. This, of course, is mere gossip. The edict against dueling is laughed at by him. It was he who killed M. de Breuil a week or ten days ago."

Richelieu waited, a question in his eyes. He knew more was coming, knew the climax was at hand, and he was right.

Mazarin went on smoothly, suavely, yet with words that drove home.

"When Madame de Chevreuse was so nearly taken near Lonjumeau—" and a flicker of triumph shone in his dark eyes—"it was this M. de Bergerac who intervened and who caused her escape."

The long, firm fingers of Richelieu closed upon the wax seal and crushed it with a slow and powerful gesture. Mazarin, however, was far from done. He had put his victim in the net; now he had to draw closer the meshes.

"If you recall," pursued the subtle Italian, "that passport for Sieur Vaugon was secured by M. Cinq Mars, according to the report made by the clerks of the seals. I made the unfortunate error of thinking Vaugon was Mme. de Chevreuse in disguise, when apparently he was a mere messenger. It is now obvious that M. de Bergerac has been more active than we had supposed. Evidently it was he, and not Vaugon, who bore a commission from her Majesty; and we can guess to whom that commission was destined. If Chevreuse, or if Cinq Mars or others, were attempting to form some new conspiracy against your Eminence—"

"Exactly," said Richelieu crisply. "You will kindly have this de Bergerac arrested and brought to me. I'll interrogate him myself regarding the matter, and we'll afford the gentlemen of our guard an example which they'll remember."

Chavigny bowed. Richelieu pulled up his chair to the table and took his quill. Mazarin melted into the shadows with a quiet smile.

CHAPTER XII

DISGRACE

IT WAS dark when Vaugon's stumbling nag brought him into Paris, unquestioned, and he jogged along the narrow streets toward the Seine in some perplexity as to his course.

His most immediate need was to get supper, then to rid himself of the horse. The sorry beast only rendered him conspicuous here in Paris. He could get clothes enough to replace his shabby garments at Cyrano's lodgings, for Cyrano had no lack.

"I must be close to that *auberge* in Rue Ci-git-le-coeur," thought Vaugon, "where I found my horse and sword. Good! Leave the horse there and get a bite, then look up Cyrano."

Inquiring his way, he soon found himself in St. Germain, and turned into the narrow street with the sentimental name. When he dismounted in the court of the Cloche he called for the host. It was as yet scarce the dinner hour, and Vaugon had the full evening ahead.

"Ten days or so ago," he said, when the host appeared, "a gentleman waited here with a horse for me—M. Vaugon. Do you remember the circumstance?"

The host bowed, threw a glance at the horse, and his jaw fell.

"Perfectly, monsieur, perfectly—but what a devil of a change in the animal!"

"It is not the same," Vaugon laughed. "However, I'll leave it for that gentleman. If he does not claim the animal, it's yours."

"Hm!" said the host. "He left word regarding the horse and sword, m'sieu, asking that I send both to the Hotel de Nevers if you returned them."

Vaugon nodded and removed his baldric.

"Here is the sword, there the horse. Good! I want a bite of supper."

In ten minutes he was appeasing the inner man with much satisfaction. Food and wine can lend a remarkably roseate hue to lowering clouds. Since Cyrano had certainly arrived some hours ahead of him, de Plessis was probably taken care of ere this; it would be far better to seek Cyrano's lodgings in Rue St. Etienne, therefore, than to take any chances on the Pinecone. With this resolve, Vaugon paid his score and set out afoot. Coming to the quay, he turned to the left, seeking the Pont Neuf rather than the Bridge of Notre Dame.

It was no mere bridge alone, but a promenade between booths, a street fair, aflame with torches and cresets, where great braziers of glowing charcoal warmed the chill air and where all the mountebanks, jugglers and street merchants of Paris assembled. From the bridge and its approaches ascended the raucous merriment of a perpetual crowd, a shrill and joyous babble of voices. As the proverb said, one could not pass the bridge without meeting a girl, a monk and a white horse, and this diversity of people never lacked.

Vaugon found himself suddenly entrained and carried along in a rush of the "rainbow regiment," as the liveried lackeys were named. Just to one side the bridge entrance, where a little tower arose over the river, opposite the Rue Guénégaud, was the marionette theater of one Jean Briocci, and this had suddenly become the center of attraction. Not because of the flaming, smoking cresets, not because of the marionette-play, which had not yet begun, but because of the extraordinary creature promenading up and down before the stage, to the orders of his master. Small wonder the crowd rushed and gaped and guffawed; small wonder Vaugon himself was nothing loath to stare!

Briocci and his assistant, nimble tongued both, were firing back and forth a volley of repartée calculated to attract an audience, but it was not the master of marionettes or his clownish aide, but the central figure, on which attention was fashioned. This figure as that of a monkey.

No small monkey, but nearly man sized, this beast was excellently trained. For all his malignant aspect, he was harmless enough and unchained. He wore a cavalier's plumed hat, a gay suit, high boots and at his side hung a blunt pointed sword. Grimacing, shaking his head at the laughing faces, he caught a word from his master and drew forth his sword, nimbly enough.

"Fagotin!" exclaimed Briocci sharply. Here was another jest; this monkey had a name and knew it. "Fagotin, I see a gentleman of his Majesty's guards approaching."

Instantly, Fagotin brought his sword to the salute.

"No, I mistake," said Briocci. "That gentleman is a Cardinalist."

On the word, Fagotin lowered his sword and made a very different sort of gesture. The crowd broke into a wild howl of delight, for the cardinal was richly hated.

"Ah!" cried out Briocci, peering through the crowd. "Here's luck, my masters; here's luck for our poor Fagotin! All he lacks to make a man of him is to have a real nose, eh? Come! We'll make a trade; you over there! We'll trade half a tail for half a nose!"

VAUGON could not make out who was being addressed, but the crowd uttered a yell of delight and began to swirl about. For a moment Vaugon caught sight of a handsomely attired figure, evidently that of a gentleman, which was almost at once shut from his sight. Briocci impudently continued his tirade and one of the lackeys took it up.

"*Holà, m'sou!* You with the nose! Come and make the trade, d'you hear?"

A sudden cold shiver seized on Vaugon. The nose—could it be? If so, he knew only too well what would happen.

"*Canaille!*" roared out a voice all too familiar to Vaugon. It was drowned in a storm of shouts.

In a flash, the temper of the throng had turned from laughter to ugly and vicious anger. Vaugon fought desperately to make way. He saw the lackeys around whipping forth rapiers, heard their furious yells while Briocci tried shrilly but vainly to quiet the tumult he had raised. And then, above all, rose the shrill, sharp scream of a man dying.

Vaugon shouted, but his voice was lost in the uproar, and he devoted himself to trying to get free of the mass. Cyrano or not, here were twenty or thirty lackeys taking the part of their fellow, and it would not be the first or last time that a gentleman went down under the blades of the rainbow regiment.*

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*The last time was in 1654, causing an edict against the wearing of swords by lackeys.

Cyrano, indeed—and what a Cyrano! Plumed out in all the finery he could muster up, Cyrano was undoubtedly drunk. He stood with his back to the marionette enclosure, bawling forth something that was quite lost in the tumult, and before him was an open space where steel glittered red in the ruddy light. A wall of steel was around him, two men lay at his feet, and his long blade glimmered and flickered back and forth as the crowd pressed in. Then, abruptly, he gathered himself and leaped. The one charged the thirty.

For a moment he not only charged them but broke them. His blade licked home again, again, faster than eye could follow; men staggered, sank down, broke back from that terrible rapier flash. Then a swirl pressed them in, shoved Cyrano to one side, and they were at him from behind.

Vaugon found himself there in time, heard a yell of recognition from Cyrano, came back to back with his friend, and the blades scraped. A man went down, another staggered back, cleared again! Cyrano regained his old position, Vaugon now at his side, and the wall of steel crept in anew.

"Well met, comrade!" bellowed Cyrano exultantly. "At them, now, at them!"

From behind them rose a wild, shrill scream, the voice of Briocci.

"Fagotin! Fagotin, to me, you devil's imp— Fagotin! To me!"

A swirl of the crowd, startled cries. Vaugon stared in astonishment. Cyrano was engaged with two furious lackeys, and suddenly a third burst in upon him. A third, no lackey, but Fagotin, chattering shrilly, driving in his pointless rapier, gone wild with excitement and the uproar around.

Vaugon found himself busy enough with a sweep of blades that circled him, but from the corner of his eye he saw Cyrano stagger as the blunt sword of Fagotin reached his side. In the confusion, in the flickering light, Cyrano knew only that another assailant was there, and with a sidelong leap, he thrust viciously in ripost.

Fagotin, pierced through the throat, went down in a grotesque dying heap.

"The monkey!" went up a wild yell. "The monkey! He's killed the monkey!"

The throng drew back. A laugh started up, and went into a shaking roar of mirth. Only now did Cyrano realize what he had done. For a moment he stood, staring, transfixed; then an oath burst from him and he went at the crowd before him like a madman. He broke them, drove them headlong, Vaugon following; he beat them with the flat of his sword, kicked, struck, raved wild curses. And through all the tumult came a piercing whistle and a sharper yell. The archers of the watch had arrived.

"Across the bridge, Cyrano! Quick!"

"Devil take it!" panted Cyrano. "Come, then, *mordieu!* Run for it."

Vaugon was far from any comprehension, but with the archers at the other end of the bridge, this was no time for delay.

"Lead the way, then," he responded. "I was heading for your lodgings, hoping to find you. Where's de Plessis?"

"At the Louvre," said Cyrano curtly; he broke into his long stride.

LEAVING the bridge and its throngs behind, they plunged into the maze of narrow streets beyond, and in ten minutes reached their destination, a small cabaret, empty at the moment, where Cyrano seemed well known. He headed for a table in one corner.

"Wine, my particular wine!" he ordered. "Half a dozen of it, Master Jacques."

"Instantly, m'sieu," came the response.

Before the two men were well seated, the wine arrived. Cyrano flung down money, seized a bottle and filled the cups. In his face was stamped a fearful brooding, a perfect agony of despair.

"What in the devil's name is the matter with you?" exclaimed Vaugon, catching the other's wrist. "Are you wounded?"

"Wounded?" Cyrano laughed harshly. "Would to heaven one of those blades had gone through me! Wounded? Aye!

Wounded to the very soul—done for, damned eternally!"

And lifting his cup, he emptied it in two gulps.

"But why?" demanded the amazed and startled Vaugon. "What's happened?"

"Eh?" Cyrano's eyes blazed luridly at him. "Don't you understand—back there? Bad enough to have lost my temper, crossed swords with a pack of despicable lackeys, dishonored myself and my blade! But worse yet, that damned monkey!" Cyrano groaned, then spat an oath and reached for the bottle.

"But why worry about the monkey?" asked Vaugon.

"My friend, look at me," he said with a certain sad simplicity. "I am a man marked out by nature. I have no fortune, no hope in life; I'm a living laugh for others! Well, then, those others have learned not to laugh, you comprehend? One thing I can do supremely well, and that is to kill those who laugh. Do you know that one night a band of assassins tried to catch one of my friends, poor old Lignières, and caught me instead? I killed two of them, wounded seven, and put the rest to flight. That's history, comrade—that's Cyrano de Bergerac as they tell of him in Paris. But now, now!"

The strong passionate face was contorted for a moment.

"Look at me now!" went on Cyrano, flinging out his hands. "I had killed laughter, you understand? I had made myself respected, feared; in two campaigns I have been twice wounded, twice noted for bravery. This evening in the street I met M. de Bourgogne of the Regiment de Conti; do you know how he greeted me? 'Cyrano, the first swordsman of France!' That's the honest truth, comrade. And now, now, Cyrano, the killer of monkeys. Cyrano, the slayer of Fagotin. Cyrano, the battler of lackeys. Cyrano, Cyrano the damned! Ah, it's too much."

Cyrano raised his tortured face, and to Vaugon's amazement broke into a laugh.

"Do you know what they'll say? I'll say it first, by the lord!" he exclaimed vibrantly. "There's the joke that'll never down, Vaugon! *Cyrano embroche le singe de Brioche*—Cyrano spits the monkey of Signor Spit. Bah! Farewell to Cyrano the soldier. Farewell to Cyrano the swordsman. I'll never touch rapier again in this life, comrade! Here, fill your cup. One thing, one thing only remains to me! At least, I can laugh louder than they, I can make the sting drive deeper, I can use a pen to fill all the world with gall and bitterness and raillery! Here's a health to the new Cyrano."

The two cups touched and, when Cyrano wiped his lips, there was a new light in his eyes. The sharpest of his passion was endured; now Vaugon saw the old smile creeping back to his face, the old brave glint in his eyes, the braver for the misery crammed down behind it.

"There, a truce to this poor shabby Cyrano!" exclaimed the Gascon; he put out his hand. "Welcome, comrade! And thanks for your help. All's well? You caught that rascal d'Artagnan in the snare, eh?"

Vaugon nodded, glad to distract his companion's thoughts, and told of what had taken place at Chatillon that morning.

"I gave him the letter because I felt sorry for him," he concluded, while Cyrano stared at him, round eyed. "Eh? What's wrong with it? You wanted that warning to reach Richelieu, and certainly d'Artagnan—"

Cyrano exploded into abrupt, nervous laughter. He caught his side, guffawed, roared until the host and waiter came to stare. Then he sobered.

"Oh, ineffable d'Artagnan!" he cried out gaily. "What a jest! Vaugon, you didn't know what I had written in that letter, eh?"

OUTSIDE, a queer face thrust itself to the thick glass of the window, peering in at the two. It was a brutal face, unintelligent, more like the face of an animal than of a man. Then it was gone again, swiftly.

From plumed beaver to shoes, Cyrano insisted on exchanging garments. His outfit suited Vaugon well enough, and he got into the torn, stained, shabby garments of Vaugon with a laugh and a shrug at their ancient cut. He was more than unsteady on his feet and, from scattered comments, Vaugon knew that his first premise had been correct. Cyrano had probably been drunk when he came to the Pont Neuf.

Presently the two returned to their table in the main room. Vaugon spoke of seeking quarters, but Cyrano dismissed the notion, opened another bottle, set himself to drink. He had relapsed into a dark mood, and was evidently set on drowning everything in wine. Vaugon realized more and more clearly what an appalling tragedy had taken place when Fagotin was spitted.

The last bottle had just been opened by Cyrano's unsteady fingers when the tavern door was flung wide and into the place broke half a dozen men. Cyrano looked up, started to rise, then rolled back helplessly into his seat. Vaugon turned, and was petrified. Facing him were a number of the watch, and at their head, pointing to him, a brutish faced, ill dressed man whom he recognized on the instant.

It was the one man in Paris who might have known his face, and who knew it—his jailer from the Bastille!

Before Vaugon could speak, before he could move, he was jerked from his seat. A cloth was flung about his head, his arms were bound, and a moment later he felt himself being carried out into the cold night air, back to death in life.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BASTILLE

ALL PARIS fairly howled with delight over the story of Cyrano de Bergerac and the monkey of Briocci. All Paris, that is to say, except the owner of the late Fagotin. Signor Briocci had no difficulty in learning the identity of the slayer, for Cyrano's face and sword were known all over Paris. With morning, Briocci took unto himself much wine and a few friends, and started a search for Cyrano through all the taverns. Not finding him, and having no recourse except the law, he straightway engaged an advocate and filed suit for fifty pistoles damages.

This activity on the part of Briocci gave impetus to the story, sent it rolling afar upon a huge wave of laughter. Ere morning, it had reached the guards' barracks, and from there it came to the Louvre, the Palais Cardinal and the Faubourg St. Germain. By noon half the wits of Paris were busy embroidering the story, lampooning it and enlarging upon it most fantastically.

D'Artagnan heard it as soon as he had dressed and gained the street. In order to find Vaugon, he had to find Cyrano; but M. de Bergerac had dropped completely out of sight, as a visit to his lodgings proved. While there, d'Artagnan ran into a fellow guardsman, M. des Besmaux, and was quick to sniff the latter's errand.

At the Pinecone the two guardsmen ran into a riotous assembly, both of their companions and of the poetical and philosophical element, all friends of Cyrano and all making merry over the story of the monkey. To them, as to all Paris, the ironical quip of the thing was irresistible—Cyrano, the deadliest swordsman of the day, slaughtering lackeys and a monkey on the Pont Neuf!

Lignières, the poet, was making epigrams on the tale with a gay crowd around him. Tristan l'Hermite, Molière, Chapelle and others from the College of Lisieux were going into roars of laughter while the huge epicure, St. Amant, Comte d'Harcourt, sat at a table and recounted the story as he knew it, between bites and sups. At another side, Le Bret and half a dozen other officers were talking loudly and drinking hard, but no Cyrano. To all the questions of d'Artagnan but one response was returned. Nobody had seen him or heard of him!

"Perhaps," suggested some one facetiously, "he's hidden himself in the

Bastille! Faith, it wouldn't be past him."

"Ha!" exclaimed an officer. "I hear they caught some escaped prisoner last night; might be Cyrano by mistake?"

"What's that?" asked d'Artagnan quickly. "An escaped prisoner? Where?"

The officer shrugged.

"Damme if I know! Found him drunk in some tavern in Rue St. Étienne, I understand. What's all this about Briocci? Somebody ought to go over there and wreck that cursed Italian's outfit—teach him to play his damned monkey tricks on gentlemen—"

D'Artagnan paid the score, gestured to des Besmaux and rose. Outside, in the street he caught the other's arm.

"Attention, now! We're on the trail. To the Rue St. Étienne and inquire in every wineshop we pass. Forward!"

"And a drink with every inquiry," said des Besmaux genially. "Forward!"

IT WAS nearing four o'clock when d'Artagnan led his staggering comrade into a small wineshop, not a block from Cyrano's lodgings. It was empty. Besmaux ordered wine, and d'Artagnan instituted cautious inquiries of the proprietor. The latter nodded.

"*Diantre, m'sieu!* It was last night in this place. Regard! Poor M. de Bergerac and a friend—they broke in suddenly, seized on his friend, hauled him forth and all without a word, mind you! An *évadé* from the Bastille, some one said—hm! Perhaps and perhaps not. A very proper gentleman."

"And M. de Bergerac?"

"In the rear room, m'sieu. Ah, there he goes again! He's beautifully drunk, I assure you. Listen to his Greek and Latinity, would you?"

In fact, the voice of Cyrano broke sonorously upon them from the rear room, rolling forth a drunken flood of words.

"Man is not a beast because he looks down," bellowed the maudlin voice. "Ha! A beast looks up, and why? Because he seeks to complain to heaven of his condition, naturally. A man looks down in order to contemplate the creation of which he is lord, because there's nothing in heaven to cause him any envy. Ovid says it, messieurs, plainly enough—'*Os homini sublime dedit*' and so forth. If you accept the thesis, damme if you don't have—"

D'Artagnan shoved his way into the rear room. There sat Cyrano, a heap of empty bottles around him. He was alone, shut up with himself, pouring forth a pseudo-philosophic rhapsody, staring blankly at the world from bloodshot, unseeing eyes. He did not know d'Artagnan in the least.

"By the saints!" hiccoughed des Besmaux. "He's drunk as a lord! Can't arrest a drunken man, that's sure."

"Nor make him talk," said d'Artagnan. "Catch hold! Up with him."

The stupid guardsman had the strength of three, and between them they dragged Cyrano to his feet. He could not walk, much less protest or realize what was going on. They got him out to the street, and the obliging host followed with a bucket of water, thoroughly dousing the unhappy profligate.

Cyrano protested then, stoutly enough. Spluttering, fighting, roaring, he broke away from them and rushed back to his den. His head was somewhat cleared, however, and when d'Artagnan followed, he recognized him.

"Ha! It's you, rascally Gascon! No use, can't arrest our Vaugon now, blast you! They got him, took him back to the Bastille, safe from you there, eh? This is a scurvy trick to play a comrade who soaked me with water? Poor Cyrano's done for, anyhow. He'll never hold sword again, sworn never to touch a sword, or he'd put the point in your throat!"

Bastille! D'Artagnan went cold at this confirmation of his fears. He broke into queries, and presently wormed out of Cyrano how Vaugon had been recognized by his jailer and had been promptly apprehended. He tried to get some information about the letter he had given Richelieu, but there Cyrano's brain refused to click.

"Letter? No letter all; only one right here, left at my lodgings for Vaugon. Here it is. Keep it," and he threw down a sealed and folded document addressed to Vaugon in his care. "I'll give it to you, devil take your shrewd eyes! Take it and clear out. For a pistole I'd crack a bottle over your head—don't like your face and never did."

"Nor I yours, you hawk nosed imbecile!" growled d'Artagnan. However, he took the letter and called des Besmaux. "I'll give him to you, my friend," he said helplessly, indicating the drooping Cyrano. "Take him, drink with him, sober him if you can. The saints and angels defend you if you take him to the cardinal in this condition! Farewell. I have worries of my own."

So saying, he left the two in company, slammed the door, ordered a bottle of wine and flung himself down at a table in the outer room to think. Examination of the letter for Vaugon showed an illegible seal, so he pocketed it and considered his own situation with increasing gloom.

With a hearty Gascon oath, d'Artagnan produced his order of arrest and read it over and over, despondently. Suddenly he checked himself, frowning, looked more closely at the order, glanced up and stared speculatively at the street, and his eyes widened. An eager breath flared his nostrils, as a dog who scents game. Hastily, he looked at his purse, found it still fairly well supplied. He leaped to his feet.

"*Cadédis!*" he exclaimed. "Not for his sake, but for my own, I'll do it!"

He flung down a coin, caught up his hat and rushed out into the street.

ON THE eastern side of Paris, beyond which had pushed the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and with its triangular bastion pointing toward this suburb, stood the Bastille, its eight massive and gigantic towers seeming like so many vast cannon set on end and threatening heaven itself.

Late in the afternoon, an hour or more after d'Artagnan had discovered the hopeless Cyrano in his hiding place, a coach with closed shutters came rumbling from the direction of Paris and halted at the outer gate. The sentinel there barred the way with his question.

"*Ordre du Roi!*" came the response.

At these three magic words the sentinel stepped aside and presented arms. "The King's order!" The horses tugged at the coach, the rumbling wheels passed the gate and crossed the wide court within, but those magic words had gone ahead. Shop windows were hastily closed, loiterers vanished from sight; in a moment the court became empty, deserted, silent.

The coach disappeared at the other end of the court, crossed a large bridge and came to another inner court, this one paved, treeless, bleak. At the bottom of this second court was a very pretty house, with a little park behind; in this house lived the governor of the Bastille. Passing this house, the coach continued through the park, and came to a blank wall two hundred feet high. The coach halted before a slimy green moat, on the other side of which was an iron grilled door, the only opening in that massive wall. The three magic words once more rang out. With clang and clatter, a drawbridge descended, the portcullis was raised and the coach finally entered the Bastille itself, the courtyard surrounded by those massive towers, each of which had a name.

The coach halted, its door opened, and d'Artagnan descended.

"M. du Tremblay?" he inquired of the soldier who met him.

"He is with the chief jailer, m'sieu," was the response. "Will you follow?"

D'Artagnan assented, but from a doorway appeared the jovial figure of the governor himself.

"Ha, monsieur! You bring me another guest?"

"Not so," said d'Artagnan. "I come to relieve you of a guest."

"Welcome, in any case. Come, we've a fire in here and can be comfortable while we discuss the matter."

D'Artagnan grimaced and did not respond to this pleasantry. He knew du Tremblay by reputation and bowed in a very cold manner which caused the governor to lose his genial aspect.

"By all means, M. du Tremblay," he said icily. "His Eminence, of course, can wait. Let us seek the fire and warm ourselves."

"Devil take it, you have orders, I must read them, and it's getting too dark here to make out a thing! Come inside," said du Tremblay.

D'Artagnan smiled to himself and followed the governor into a large room where a fire burned and candles shone. The governor was going over his massive register of guests with the chief jailer, whom he now dismissed.

"Well, monsieur?" he inquired, a trifle nervously. "His Eminence has heard, then, that we have recaptured the man recently escaped?"

D'Artagnan did not reply, except by holding out his order of arrest. Du Tremblay took it, with a disturbed air and held it to the candles. He looked up, astonished.

"But, monsieur, this is not an order to deliver a prisoner to you! This is an order of arrest! And for a man named Vaugon. We have, I assure you, no one of that name here."

D'Artagnan knew perfectly well that he was risking his neck. His own chance of success lay in persuading du Tremblay that the governor was risking his own neck by disobedience. He knew, too, things that he was not supposed to know about Vaugon. He must take a chance.

With a glance at the closed door, d'Artagnan threw off his icy manner, came close to the governor and tapped the latter on the arm.

"Come, come, my dear sir!" he said, smiling. "We are alone, we do not need to bandy words, we may speak frankly! It's most unfortunate you didn't see his Eminence today."

"Eh? Eh?" exclaimed du Tremblay. "But I went to the Palais Cardinal this morning. He was too busy to see me. I left the report that we had taken the prisoner."

D'Artagnan was delighted by these evidences of agitation, not to mention this discovery.

"Just so," he said. "This Vaugon was recognized in that wine shop last night, was seized and brought here. So far, excellent! But, my dear monsieur, why didn't you advise his Eminence of it last night? There's the whole difficulty!"

"The devil!" exclaimed du Tremblay. "Because—in confidence, eh?"

"Upon the word of a gentleman," said d'Artagnan.

The other took his arm.

"Because, my dear fellow, I knew nothing of it until this morning! There was a little party last night in the apartment of Marshal de Bassompierre, you comprehend?"

D'Artagnan comprehended thoroughly. Du Tremblay had a certain reputation.

"WELL, his Eminence is furious," said d'Artagnan. "Come! Do you insist that you have no Sieur Vaugon here?"

Somewhat uncertainly, the governor pointed to the massive register.

"See for yourself. It is true that a passport was taken from the escaped prisoner, and this passport bore the name you mention, but—"

"M. du Tremblay, we speak as friends," said d'Artagnan with a confidential air. "When I was given this order of arrest, shall I tell you what was said? Not to me, of course; it was not even intended for me to hear. Does it interest you?"

"Yes, yes! What did his Eminence say?" demanded the other hurriedly.

"Just this. That, if an order signed by the king and his minister would not allow me to bring a prisoner to the presence of that minister, something must be done about it. Now, I leave you to your imagination, my dear du Tremblay, what might be done. It is even possible this order might be a sort of proof of your obedience, of your good faith, you see?"

Du Tremblay dropped into a chair.

"But, devil take it! It's not an order to deliver a prisoner; it's not the form, it's not the wording."

"May I ask," said d'Artagnan, "under what name your prisoner is registered?"

The governor started.

"Eh? This—this Vaugon—"

"Exactly. This Vaugon. He's an ordinary prisoner, no doubt?"

"Not a bit of it," said the governor, troubled. "Not a bit of it! The whole thing is most unusual."

D'Artagnan waved his hand.

"Exactly, and so is this order. For the love of the saints, monsieur, use your good sense. Was I not sent here to get him? Didn't the cardinal personally send me, write that order with his own hand? Look at the wording of it. It takes precedence above all other orders. What the devil more can you ask?"

"Still, it's not the correct form," objected du Tremblay.

"Well, granted," d'Artagnan shrugged. "The whole point is that his Eminence sent me to get this man, desires to interrogate him personally. There's his signature in evidence, which I am to leave with you in exchange, as a receipt, after signing it. Now, consider, is this receipt satisfactory or not? If not, I return to my coach. I return to the Palais Cardinal. I tell His Eminence that you refuse to surrender M. Vaugon to the order of the king and his minister. Upon my word, my dear du Tremblay, I shouldn't like to be in your shoes when that message reaches Richelieu! However, since that's your choice—"

"For the love of the saints, hold on!" exclaimed du Tremblay in some agitation. "Beyond doubt, you're right enough there. Yes, yes, you have the right of it! *Corbac*, my friend, you've the right of it! But here's the *hic* of the whole thing. This order under which our man is held *au grand secret!* Now, I've no M. Vaugon to deliver to you. No such name appears on my register. He's down as M. Personne, you comprehend?"

D'Artagnan cursed the petty formalities of this by no means petty place.

"It seems to me, monsieur, that if you found on your prisoner a passport signed by the king, and made no mention of this fact on your register—"

"Ha!" Du Tremblay started up. "Come here, come here! Let's see about it. I believe you've the right of it, curse me if you haven't! Here, move those candles a bit closer."

Du Tremblay leaned over the huge register upon its rack, and d'Artagnan joined him. The finger of the governor fell upon the last entry, dated that same morning. After the name of M. Personne was the entry:

> Bearing passport in the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon.

"There's your *hic* and your *hoc*," said d'Artagnan, and glanced at the clock on the wall, which indicated a few minutes after six. "*Diable!* I must ask for your decision instantly, my dear governor. His Eminence has a definite appointment with me, and I intend to be there to the minute. If I'm there without my prisoner, so much the worse for you."

In another five minutes the scrape of feet was heard, and between turnkey and jailer Vaugon strode into the room. At sight of d'Artagnan there, a gleam shot into his eyes, and his shoulders straightened a trifle. Despondency had weighed heavily on him this day, and despair had sunk into his heart and soul, yet here was d'Artagnan! And du Tremblay's next words enlightened him, sent his shoulders still more erect.

"Monsieur, this gentleman has come to take you from our hospitality for a little while; I trust you have no complaints? Well, and now for this receipt."

"It is here, monsieur," said d'Artagnan, and produced it. He leaned over the table and signed, signed again the paper du Tremblay handed him, the regular form of receipt for departing guests. "This is all?"

"All," echoed du Tremblay.

He had found the few belongings of Vaugon, and now restored them, passport and money. Vaugon, not knowing what was happening, not daring to ask, said little. D'Artagnan turned to him ceremoniously.

"Will you have the goodness to accompany me, monsieur?"

Vaugon assented silently.

In another five minutes they were in the coach, taking leave of du Tremblay. A moment later the coach was rumbling out through the inner portal, crossing the park and the square beyond. Not until the outer gate was passed and they were in the streets of Paris did either man speak. Then Vaugon's voice broke the silence, tremulously.

"D'Artagnan! Is this a miracle?"

"Faith, I think it is!" said d'Artagnan with a laugh. "Richelieu gave me an order of arrest, to bring you before him. I found you were in the Bastille and presented the order. What will come of it I don't know, but to save my own neck I want your parole."

"You have it," said Vaugon simply, "and my thanks."

"Bah! Let thanks wait. You may be out of the pan into the fire, comrade. Shall we let this coach go and get some supper? It's six thirty; we've time enough."

"If you like. Where's Cyrano?"

"Drunk. Arrested. Heaven knows where! Wait. He gave me a paper for you. Too dark now. Let's get out of this coach; I hired it for the occasion. We'll drop into the nearest tavern and get a bite to eat and a drop to drink."

"Find Cyrano," said Vaugon.

D'Artagnan shrugged and directed the coachman to the wine shop where he had left des Besmaux and Cyrano.

When the coach halted, d'Artagnan paid and dismissed it and the two men entered the place. The host recognized d'Artagnan and bowed.

"Gone, monsieur," he said, to the inquiry. "Gone ten minutes ago, each of them holding up the other. M. de Bergerac appeared to be sobering somewhat; at least, he was able to walk."

"Very well." D'Artagnan shrugged. "We'll occupy your rear room for a little. Give us wine, food, whatever you have."

Vaugon followed him and, when they were seated with the door closed, d'Artagnan smiled.

"Faith, you looked dressed for a court ball! Where'd you get the finery? And have you heard about the monkey?"

"I was there," said Vaugon.

For ten minutes they talked, exchanging news; then d'Artagnan clapped hand to pocket.

"That letter, here it is! And the document bearing the king's signature, his promise to Sier Vaugon, good! I had a hard time getting it out of Mazarin; damn that Italian cat! But here it is. What's the letter?"

Vaugon took the folded and sealed paper, opened it out, and held it to the light. To his astonishment, it was in the same writing that showed on the other document and bore the same signature.

> Admit Sieur Vaugon to our presence this evening.
> —LOUIS

He passed it to d'Artagnan, who read it and whistled long.

"*Cadédis!* You've three signatures of his Majesty in your pocket this blessed minute—and an appointment with the cardinal! That'll spoil all three of them, I'm afraid. D'you want to go to the Louvre here and now, chance everything, see the cardinal later? There's just time. Yes or no?"

Vaugon put the papers in his pocket and made a weary gesture. He knew this pass had been obtained by Mlle. de Closset for him, but now . . .

"No," he said. "No, my friend. I have to face the matter out with Richelieu; as well now as another time. He asked you about that mole on my cheek, did he? Then he's recognized me. Face it like a man, see what happens, and whine to the king for help later if needs must? I want to get the suspense over."

"Good," said d'Artagnan. "Then let's eat, drink and be merry; tomorrow we may both be in the Bastille!"

Vaugon shivered slightly. This long day in his dungeon had nearly broken him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HUMOR OF HIS EMINENCE

THAT the cardinal was in excellent spirits that evening was quite plain, for the news from abroad was good. England had received the exiled queen-mother, but dared not insist that France receive her back. The Duke of Lorraine was in Nancy, but appeared impotent. The Spaniards were extremely polite, which meant they were afraid. The only cloud on the horizon hovered over Sedan, where the Comte de Soissons and the Duc de Bouillon remained inactive. As to enemies closer at home, only Richelieu knew what would happen when he came face to face with Cinq Mars that evening. The cardinal was smiling grimly when Mazarin entered and advanced.

"Your Eminence will recall the matter of M. de Bergerac?" said Mazarin.

"Eh? Oh, the duelist!" Richelieu leaned back and smiled. "Yes. What's this story I heard today about the monkey of Briocci? Is it true?"

"Quite true, Monseigneur. M. de Bergerac has not yet been arrested, it seems, and very luckily. The whole city is laughing over that story. If de Bergerac were now brought to the scaffold for dueling—well, your Eminence can see the effect would be lost."

Richelieu had not thought of the matter, but it was perfectly clear that Mazarin was right. The effect would certainly be lost.

"M. du Tremblay was here this morning while you were closeted with the Spanish envoy—"

The cardinal looked over the report and laid it down with a thin smile.

"Good. Give me an order of delivery."

Leaning over his table, he wrote rapidly, and handed the order to Mazarin.

"Send to the Bastille and have this recaptured prisoner brought here to me. After the performance I'll return here, but shall wait in the courtyard in my coach. I don't want to move about, you understand. I must save myself for the Louvre. I can't afford to collapse there of all places. That young guardsman, M. d'Artagnan, has not asked for me?"

"He has not been here, Monseigneur."

Richelieu smiled grimly, but his smile died at the next words of Mazarin. They were only a murmured statement that a certain man was waiting, but Richelieu stiffened in his seat and made an imperative gesture. Mazarin went to the door and returned with a dark faced, powerful man wearing the soiled robes of a Capuchin friar. This man was the head of Richelieu's intelligence service in Sedan.

"You!" exclaimed the cardinal. "When did you arrive?"

"Just now, Monseigneur." The Capuchin bowed. "I came straight here."

Richelieu glanced at the clock. He would be armed now, armed against them all!

"News?"

"So important that I dared not trust it to letter."

Mazarin had discreetly melted into the shadows, but Richelieu turned to him.

"That's all, M. de Mazarin. Kindly see to those matters at once."

Mazarin departed. Left alone, the Capuchin came to the table, leaned over and spoke in a very low voice.

"On the road this morning, Monseigneur, I met a party of cavaliers. Among them was Mme. de Chevreuse, garbed as a man. They were riding hard for the frontier."

Richelieu gestured impatiently. Even this news did not disturb his good humor.

"Bah! Let them ride. Speak quickly; I'm pressed for time. Your news?"

"Chevreuse has seduced Don Antonia Sarmiento, governor of the Low Countries; she has seduced him personally and politically. He will send troops and officers to the Comte de Soissons, who intends to attack from Sedan in the spring. Further, he has arranged a payment of a thousand écus a month to MM. de la Valette and Soubise, who undertake to raise the Protestants of Guyenne in revolt at the same moment. Olivares, the Spanish ambassador here, is in communication with Comte de Soissons in regard to a Spanish army moving against the southern frontier at the same time. Olivares has promised nothing, remains discreet. M. Cinq Mars will undertake to make a Spanish treaty later, but of this I have no evidence."

The eyes of Richelieu gleamed frostily at all this; his long, delicate fingers moved convulsively, as if in the act of crushing something.

"What evidence have you of the rest?" he demanded coldly. "If Soissons revolts—good! Then I will add Sedan to France. But, what evidence? Letters? Dispatches?"

The Capuchin rested mute, his gaze meeting the probing regard of Richelieu silently. The cardinal frowned.

"Well? I absolve you. Speak!"

"The evidence of the confessional, Monseigneur."

The red cardinal was startled at this. "Good!" he said quietly. "Let them speak if they dare tonight! Ah, traitors, I have you once more."

CATCHING up a huge furred cloak from a chair beside him, he hurried from the room, as if twenty years had dropped from his shoulders. In another five minutes he was rolling toward the Luxembourg Palace on the left bank.

Time passed. Shortly before eight a coach came into the great courtyard of the Palais Cardinal; an officer jumped out hastily, dashed into the building, and was presently standing before Mazarin, to whom he made a somewhat agitated report.

"You are positive?" exclaimed the Italian.

"I saw the receipt and signature myself," stated the officer. "M. d'Artagnan carried off the prisoner a good two hours ago, on order of his Eminence."

Mazarin touched a bell and a secretary appeared.

"Has M. d'Artagnan, a cadet of the guards, arrived here with a prisoner?"

The secretary answered in the negative.

"When he comes, bring him to me."

Mazarin, however, was fated not to be beforehand with his master on this point, since d'Artagnan had neither the intention nor the need of applying for admission.

The great inner court of the palace, securely shut off from all the world, now began to shine ruddily with torches while the galleries surrounding it were grouped with men and in the corners stood knots of horses. Short as was the distance to the Louvre, the cardinal was going in state with a company of guards to attend him; and since every one knew his Eminence was in excellent humor tonight, there was no constraint in the air.

A sudden hum of voices, an astonished murmur passed through the groups, then there was a general stir of movement. Two figures had appeared, arm in arm, figures only too well known to their comrades on guard. A laugh started up, but was stilled instantly. Des Besmaux and Cyrano de Bergerac, both obviously drunk, came to a halt, stood leaning against each other and stared around.

"P-pris'ner for 's Eminence," said des Besmaux vacantly. "Where's 's Eminence, eh?"

"In the devil's name, take care of these two fools!" said somebody.

There was a buzz of voices and a burst of laughter at mention of Briocci's monkey. The two were surrounded.

Des Besmaux, swaggering and boasting, was persuaded in one direction. Cyrano, ragged, miserable, stupefied and unprotesting, was led in another. Heroic measures were taken, and for Cyrano was provided baldric and sword, with a cloak that partially hid his shabby attire. Since no one had great confidence that Cyrano could possibly be very drunk, restoratives were chiefly applied to des Besmaux, who was utterly lost if he appeared in this condition with a prisoner. Cyrano, indeed, seemed dazed rather than drunk, and would not say a word.

Presently the pair were led back into the courtyard, now ablaze with lights from all sides. Des Besmaux was at least in control of himself, realized his position. A swift word came from the gates.

"To stations! To stations! The cardinal comes!"

Instantly the two figures were left alone; there was a scramble for saddles, and about the galleries the guards took station. A rattle of hoofs, a rumble of wheels, and into the courtyard rolled the huge state coach of Richelieu, coming to a halt before the palace entrance. The coach window opened, showing the face of Richelieu half muffled in furs. Men came forth with hot wine and food, but Richelieu dismissed them curtly. Des Besmaux advanced and saluted.

"Your Eminence, I have brought M. de Bergerac as you desired."

"Come forward, M. de Bergerac," said the dry voice of Richelieu.

Cyrano obeyed like an automaton. Richelieu glanced around.

"Where is M. d'Artagnan? He is not here?"

"I am here, Monseigneur." From the shadows of the gallery d'Artagnan advanced, followed by Vaugon. "As you ordered, I have brought M. Vaugon."

Cyrano turned, stared at them, his mouth open in stark amazement. The voice of Richelieu broke upon the silence, ominous, vibrant.

"M. d'Artagnan, do you dare jest with me? The man I sent you to arrest is in the Bastille, I understand."

D'Artagnan twirled his mustache, fully appreciating the moment.

"He *was* in the Bastille, your Eminence," he replied. "Since you ordered me to bring him, I have brought him—from the Bastille. I have the honor to present M. Vaugon."

For a long moment Richelieu was silent, sitting there face to face with Vaugon, who bowed and waited quietly. If the cardinal still doubted, his doubts were quelled by a long sigh and a startled, half muffled exclamation which burst from Cyrano.

"*Mordieu!* It's you, Vaugon—you! Or else I'm drunk."

"Advance, gentlemen, I wish to speak with you," said the cardinal. He was in high good humor. He had just come from a triumph at the Luxembourg; despite the underlying flattery and adulation of that triumph, it pleased none the less. He was going, as he very well knew, to a keener and sharper triumph at the Louvre. The man and the minister, the poet and the politician, were equally melted in the tide of this night's victory.

CYRANO and Vaugon came close to the coach. Richelieu, meeting Vaugon's steady gaze, examined him attentively, sharply.

"Who are you, M. Vaugon?"

Vaugon held the passport in his hand and now extended it.

"If your Eminence will glance at this, you'll see that I am, indeed, over the signature of his Majesty, Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

Richelieu took the passport, opened it, glanced through it curiously. Then his gaze struck out again at Vaugon.

"I am not in the mood to bandy words, monsieur," he said coldly. "Your former name!"

"Your Eminence may remember it," said Vaugon. "As for me, I have forgotten it."

"Eh?" Richelieu studied him for a moment, probed the face so oddly grave for its youth, met the calm and unflinching eyes. "Upon my word, M. Vaugon, I begin to think that I did wrong in putting you in the Bastille!"

"You did," said Vaugon curtly.

"Yesterday," he said slowly, "I received a letter bearing the name of one man, the arms and seal of another. Which of you two gentlemen can explain it?"

Vaugon, who was still ignorant of the contents of Cyrano's letter, held his peace. But from Cyrano broke an abrupt laugh, a guffaw.

"*Mordieu!* Your Eminence means our letter, eh? Come, that's droll enough!" A sudden flood of drunken garrulity flowed from his lips. "You see, Monseigneur," he cried, with a familiarity that drew a gasp from the listeners, "Vaugon and I are good comrades, excellent comrades, trust each other absolutely! Well, then, we pitched upon the secret of that rascal who's called M. le—"

"No names, if you please," cut in the icy voice of Richelieu.

For an instant it had a sobering effect. Cyrano managed a bow.

"Right, your Eminence, no names! Well, we had this secret, you see? Devilish worth while secret too! We don't like that sort of thing by half, I can tell you. Vaugon isn't what you'd call a Cardinalist, not by a good deal, and for that matter I'm not either, but we know a great man when we see one."

D'Artagnan, seeing that Cyrano was apt to say anything that came into his head, with a scandalous and damning lack of all respect, stepped forward to intervene.

"Back, if you please, M. d'Artagnan," said Richelieu dryly. "It seems that for once I am hearing the truth spoken. It is a pleasant novelty. Continue, M. de Bergerac."

"Your Eminence is right," said Cyrano affably. "*In vino veritas!* Nothing like a drop or two—where was I? Oh, yes! Well, the idea of a pack of cowardly rascals resting their rumps and planning to stick a knife into the only great man in France was a bit too much for us to stomach, and that's a fact. Being a poet myself, and knowing there are too few good poets in the world already, I resented the plot. Your Eminence is a good poet, in my estimation; an occasional line here and there will bear tinkering, but on the whole there's no one else in France who has so much proper feeling for scansion, for the effect of a phrase, for the *mot juste*—but you comprehend."

It was evident to d'Artagnan that Cyrano's brain was wakened to his precautious position.

"I comprehend, M. de Bergerac," said the cardinal, with a slight smile, "and since I have heard of your poetical ability also, I respect your criticism. We were, however, on the subject of a letter, I believe."

"Oh, yes, the letter! Well, Vaugon and I decided there was only one thing to do. How to do it was the whole question. Here was that cursed rascal d'Artagnan trying to get his nose into the secret, and it was none of his business—"

Richelieu cast a glance at d'Artagnan, who had stiffened. Cyrano continued, easily.

"—while the chances were a bit bad for Vaugon reaching your Eminence without going to the Bastille first. So we made up a combination. Vaugon carried the thing in form of a letter, which I sealed, and I carried the thing in my head, and there we were. One of us was sure to get the news to you in time. Lucky we so arranged, too! I got embroiled with that monkey who walked like a man, and this duty hound of a guardsman here arrested Vaugon and got into a mess. However, his devilish devotion to duty has its merits! Vaugon gave him the letter to bring on to you, and he brought it. Well, everything's all right. Nothing to worry about now, your Eminence."

With a sweeping gesture, Cyrano staggered into a magnificent bow and was silent.

VAUGON now for the first time comprehended the whole affair. Cyrano, ever generous, must have signed the name of Vaugon to that letter! He opened his lips to protest, then realized that he would gain nothing and might lose everything.

"Come here, M. Vaugon," said the cardinal.

Vaugon came and stood close beside the coach. Richelieu's brilliant eyes searched him for an instant, then the cardinal spoke very softly, almost under his breath.

"Kindly inform me on what errand you and M. de Bergerac rode from Paris. I have reason to believe your word means something, eh?"

Vaugon assented quietly.

"Our errand, Monseigneur, was to call at her château for Mlle. de Closset, and bring her to Paris. We did it."

"Rather, to the Louvre!" Richelieu nodded. "I know with whom you had an interview the day you departed. Very good. What connection or relation had your errand with Mme. de Chevreuse, monsieur?"

"None whatever," said Vaugon. "None, in any way or form."

"Eh, monsieur? Then how did you learn of this project, outlined in that letter?"

"By overhearing a certain gentleman boast of what his dagger would do—and when. It was on Sunday, at the Loup Pendu."

"The afternoon of the king's hunt!" Richelieu drew a deep breath. "Ah, I understand it all now—all! Tell me, M. Vaugon, you have reason to be a bitter enemy to me, I think, so why have you done this thing? Few of my enemies but would have rejoiced deeply next Saturday, had you kept quiet."

"Proving, Monseigneur," said Vaugon quietly, "that few of your enemies are gentlemen."

Across the austere, bleak features of the cardinal broke a slow smile.

"I cannot be less generous than the man whom I, or my agents, wronged. You have nothing more to fear from me, monsieur. May I ask your intentions as to the future?"

Vaugon smiled.

"Your Eminence, I hope to obtain admission to the Louvre tonight and see his Majesty, and to ask that the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon be confirmed as mine. This is all I seek. I shall perhaps remain in France, perhaps go to England."

"Good. Then, monsieur, at the Louvre I shall have a further word with you. M. d'Artagnan, I instruct you to set your prisoner at liberty."

D'Artagnan saluted stiffly. He was quivering with rage and glaring at Cyrano, whose innuendoes had rendered him furious. The cardinal, too, glanced at Cyrano.

"M. de Bergerac, something over a week ago there occurred an affray upon the highway not far from Lonjumeau. Your appearance in that affray—"

"Ah, your Eminence, that was a sad matter!" exclaimed Cyrano.

"I am seriously thinking of hanging you for it," said the cardinal, and there fell a little silence.

Cyrano swallowed hard and blinked at that austere face framed in the coach window.

"Also," pursued Richelieu after a moment, "I had considered hanging you for dueling. However, M. de Bergerac, I do not see any particular good in hanging any one, so instead, I pardon you freely on all counts. If in future—"

At this instant occurred one of those trifling and unexpected happenings which seem due only to a malign destiny, yet which can change the course of lives or empires.

Cyrano stood gaping open mouthed at the cardinal. A torch in its socket, on the wall above, spluttered and sent a few sparks floating down. One of these sparks lodged upon the cheek of Cyrano.

Dropping hand to sword, Cyrano whirled about with a bellowing exclamation. His cocked up sword slapped sharply against d'Artagnan, who shoved him aside. Cyrano staggered, his long arm lashed out and his hand struck d'Artagnan squarely across the face. Whether by intention or by accident, none could say, but the blow was given. It all happened swiftly.

"Gentlemen!" exclaimed the cardinal sharply.

"Bah!" exclaimed Cyrano, hand to cheek, other hand to sword. "This rascal has been too damned devoted to duty to suit my taste, anyway."

"Silence!" At the new note in Richelieu's voice, even Cyrano felt the breath of peril. "M. d'Artagnan, what does this mean?"

D'Artagnan had silently drawn his sword, and now, holding it in his gloved hands, brought up his knee and with one powerful effort snapped the blade. He dropped the pieces to the stones with a clang and saluted, livid with anger.

"Your Eminence, there is only one method of chastisement open to a gentleman, and that is forbidden by edict. I have no other choice except to leave the service of his Majesty."

"You become a little bold, M. d'Artagnan," said Richelieu coldly. "You have earned the cassock of a guardsman. Would you resign it before it is given?"

"Yes, if I could not wear it with honor, your Eminence."

Cyrano took an unsteady step.

"Well, well, he couldn't fight me anyway, your Eminence, that is to say, I couldn't fight him. Poor Cyrano's done for. I've sworn an oath that I'll never hold a sword in my fist again, after that cursed monkey—ah!"

Richelieu pulled his furred robe closer and a frosty smile touched his lips.

"You have appealed to me as a gentleman, M. d'Artagnan," he said. "Very well! Will some one kindly provide M. d'Artagnan with a sword?" There was a scurry to obey, and one of the guards thrust a sword into d'Artagnan's hand. Richelieu looked at Cyrano. "Come, M. de Bergerac! I do not tolerate brawling. M. d'Artagnan has demanded satisfaction, and he shall have it. You two gentlemen have my permission to settle your quarrel here and now. The survivor will take M. Vaugon's place in the Bastille. *En garde*, gentlemen!"

For a moment, stupefied astonishment held them both motionless, held all who heard paralyzed. Then Cyrano shook his head.

"Impossible, your Eminence. I've sworn an oath."

"And an excellent one," broke in Richelieu dryly. "Having the power to absolve you from this oath, I do so for this occasion. Further, I beg that you'll honor me with a verse, after your rumored habit when engaged in the gentle art of dueling. On guard!"

"*En garde, monsieur!*" echoed d'Artagnan and faced Cyrano.

The latter fumbled at his baldric, then abruptly flung himself forward in position of defense. There was a stir of movement all around the courtyard as men craned to see better. It was obvious enough that Richelieu was quietly amusing himself. A sudden sharp cry of anger broke from d'Artagnan after the first touch of blades.

"You think this is a jest, buffoon?"

What this exclamation meant, none could tell. Cyrano, however, laughed.

"Why not? A jest with death, my dear d'Artagnan! His Eminence has given the subject for a very pretty little verse; we'll make the word death the signal for a touch in the throat, eh? After the manner of that little rondelet on de Breuil—"

VAUGON stood watching, frowning. He, too, found something decidedly strange in this duel, yet could not place it. The light, the shifting figures, were deceptive. In the coach window was framed the austere countenance of Richelieu, watching with sparkling eyes.

D'Artagnan attacked, angrily enough. For all his skill, he encountered a defense like a wall of steel; feet stamped, breaths came fast, there was now and again a ring of metal as scraping blade touched hilt. It was fast and furious work in this first moment, yet d'Artagnan could not break through that guard. And Cyrano was laughing at him.

"Come, a little more spring i' the wrist, there! Not bad, not bad, at all events, I'm not facing a monkey tonight, eh? Aye, laugh on that if you like, d'Artagnan! I suppose that monkey had a funeral, eh? Well, birth and death come fast. There's an excellent little couplet to start with, for the better amusement of his Eminence. Wait, now, until we try this ripost in tierce."

Scrape and flash of blades, lunge quick parried, then Cyrano went on calmly:

"A christening is gay
  One day:
Then comes a fun'ral text
  The next.

"Not so bad meter there—short, sharp, suited to the accompaniment, eh? So you know that Spanish feint and parry, do you? But of course. Well, well, move sharp, now."

Cyrano was off the defensive now, beginning a fast and furious attack. D'Artagnan was cursing him softly, enraged and furious for some cause which Vaugon could not quite fathom. The blades crossed, held, licked in and out, disengaged.

"Nothing quite so appropriate as the subject of our verse, eh?" resumed Cyrano lightly. "Death comes to all alike, d'Artagnan. Why, there's meat for another rhyme! All of us alike, man or woman.

"A prostitute, a nun—
All's one!
A cardinal, an ass—
Both pass.

"Not very original, to be sure," said Cyrano, leaping back, recovering, engaging the lightning rapier of d'Artagnan again. "However, it'll pass, as we all must! Now for you, my friend, look to the throat! We must not keep his Eminence waiting too long, must get at the final rhyme."

Perforce he fell silent, panting, under a furious attack which demanded all his skill and agility. Time after time Vaugon saw d'Artagnan's point drive in, yet ever the wrist of Cyrano held like iron. Vaugon frowned again; something odd about that blade of Cyrano's struck his eye. But now Cyrano was attacking in turn, attacking laughingly yet with so dazzling a skill, so deadly a precision, that d'Artagnan was forced back.

"Coming, my friend!" rang out the gay, mocking voice. "Remember the rhyme, I beg of you; remember the word *death* as I foretold! We'll close the matter appropriately with the proper contrast. His Eminence appreciates the force of contrast, no doubt.

"A cry, a gasp at earth
That's birth!
A sigh, a gasp o' breath—
That's . . ."

For an instant Cyrano seemed to hang poised, immobile, motionless. Then he fairly swooped, his rapier drove and drove. D'Artagnan went back in desperate, hopeless defense.

"That's death!" rang out the voice of Cyrano, and he lunged. Like an arrow, his point went to the throat of d'Artagnan.

D'Artagnan dropped his blade, put both hands to his throat, staggered wildly, then stood gasping, yet unhurt. The sharp cry bursting from the staring guards was drowned in a sharper cry as Cyrano turned and flung his sword down in the full torchlight.

The weapon was still in its scabbard.

"Ah, your Eminence!"

Cyrano strode forward, panting, his voicing ringing out like a clarion. Gone of a sudden was all his drunken braggadocio.

"This d'Artagnan is too good a swordsman, too splendid a soldier, to be lost to his Majesty! Cyrano has fought his last duel; fought it last night with the monkey of Briocci. Cyrano is damned. Take me, then, send me to the Bastille if you like; but give my comrade d'Artagnan his cassock and his free pardon!"

In the dead silence now ensuing, Richelieu leaned forward in the coach window. A shadowy smile seemed to touch his lips and his hand was uplifted in the gesture of benediction.

"No!" he exclaimed sharply in the stunned silence. "No, M. de Bergerac, you're too good a poet to be lost to Parnassus! Go in peace—and remain in peace. Come to me in the morning, M. d'Artagnan, and we'll see about that cassock. Messieurs of the guard, we're late. To the Louvre!"

CHAPTER XV

"THE LUCK OF FOOLS"

LATE that night the dark raftered room of the Pinecone, whose beams had echoed the wild laughter of Francois Villon and the sardonic jests of Rabelais, fell upon silence. The tobacco smoke thinned. The shouts of gamesters, the rattle of dice, the clatter of bottle and cup, were gone.

One man alone remained, a gamester and a mad one, as the tumbled heap of gold on the table before him testified, a tremendous drinker, as the empty bottles piled at his elbow bore witness. He was still drinking, alone, his dark and brooding gaze staring out upon the room, when the door swung open and a shivering gallant entered. As his scarf and gay costume tokened, M. de Cuigy was an officer in the Regiment de Conti and more of a courtier than his friend at the table, whom he hailed with delight.

"Ha, Savinien! By all the gods, where have you been of late? All the world's been asking questions?"

"What have I to do with the world?" growled Cyrano. "Sit down. Drink. They'll close on us before long."

"Not if they know what's good for them." De Cuigy swung into a chair, gasped at the pile of gold and seized a bottle. "Gambling again, eh? I couldn't get away from the Louvre until too late for the fun. We had fun enough there, and no mistake! No end of gossip, Savinien. Richelieu came in like a devastating angel. Rumor says he has dropped on to some new plot. He spoke to one and another and left a veritable trail of death behind him. Ha! You should have seen M. le Grand turn pale! And—"

"Damn Richelieu," said Cyrano. "More wine, there! You and your court gossip!"

De Cuigy laughed and regarded him.

"You'll damn our cardinal once too often, old gamester! Had luck tonight, eh? Pest, man, you've a small fortune there!"

"Fortune be damned," said Cyrano. "I've resigned from the service, resigned from everything. I'm going to the moon."

"On the next bottle, granted! Resigned? Why?"

"Why? In the devil's name, haven't you heard that story?"

"The monkey? Bah!" M. de Cuigy put out a hand, gripped Cyrano warmly by the arm, spoke with unexpected feeling. "Come, old chap, don't be a fool! You're too fine a soldier to be afraid of a laugh or two. Nonsense! We'll help you stem the tide. Nobody will dare laugh to your face."

"My friend, all Paris laughs," said Cyrano gloomily. "No, the die is cast! If Henri Quatre couldn't fight Paris, I follow his example. I turn my back upon the world from this night."

"Eh? A tonsure?"

"No, a college. I shall become a philosopher. I'll enter the College of Lisieux and take to books."

"You're drunk," said the other and leaned back. "Eh! You should have seen the Louvre tonight, my old one. And there was romance in the air. A new gentleman came to court, and pox take me if he didn't have a private audience with the king and have a chat with Richelieu. Then he kissed the queen's hand and afterward danced with Mlle. de Closset, who turned regular sheep's eyes on him. What the devil! A regular countryman, by his garb!"

Cyrano's gaze bit up suddenly.

"Who was he?"

"Some damned outlandish name," said the officer carelessly. He took the long pipe fetched him by the waiter, held it to the proffered coal and drew luxuriously at the tobacco. "Comte de Vaugon, or some such name. The chamberlain announced it after his private audience. Never heard it in my life and neither did any one else. Some say he's Prince Charles of England incognito and another said he's a Spanish grandee. Bah! He's some country noble whose father lent Henri Quatre money. The luck of fools!"

Cyrano laughed harshly at this, a long, harsh, bitter laugh.

"The luck of fools!" he repeated. "Aye, good or bad, the luck of fools.

"Pox on your logic, sophistry and rules!
Some win success; and other some in pools
Of Stygian drink forget what might have been—
God, what a world! It's all the luck of fools!"

And he brooded there above the table, a somber and prescient figure.

The Camp-Fire

A free-to-all Meeting-Place *for* Readers, Writers *and* Adventurers

A Peculiar Plural

STRICTLY speaking, Mr. Quinn is correct, we believe. Yet a word like Musselman or Dragoman has become anglicized to an extent which makes more natural, to an American tongue, the *-men* plural.

I have just finished reading Mr. Brier's entertaining article about the Egyptian dragoman in *Adventure* for November 15.

Just as a matter of interest, and without any desire to carp about a small thing, I wish to dispute the plural *dragomen* used in the caption over the article, and in the article itself.

Dragoman is not a compound of the English word *man*—like *journeyman, boatman,* or *salesman.* It is a Western corruption of the Arabic word *turjman,* pronounced in the Egyptian dialect *tergmen.* It is derived from the word *tarjam,* to translate, and means interpreter, as Mr. Brier points out.

Now, as to the plural, the Arabic plural is *tarajim.* But it seems that when using the word in English we should follow the analogy of other Arabic words ending in the suffix *an* which are used in English. Three of these come to mind—*talisman, Koran* (in Arabic Qur'an), and *Mussulman* (in Arabic *Musliman*). The plurals of these words are *talismans, Korans, Mussulmans.*

Therefore, shouldn't it be *dragomans?*

Probably the plural is not important, though, for one *dragoman* at a time seems to be enough.—NORRIS W. QUINN, 3781 W. 39th Street, Cleveland, Ohio.

Along the Trail

V

BEFORE meeting the Colonel I probably should have grinned a wondering affirmative had anyone fired a direct question. "Do you consider yourself passably intelligent?"

But no longer. Let a jackrabbit sit up and sneer at me, and I humbly slide into the nearest owl hole, hoping that my projecting cranium will be taken for the boulder which inwardly it resembles . . .

The Colonel held a high place on the Allied Department of Cryptography, during the Great War. He was an immensely wealthy man. Rumor said—and it was true enough—that he possessed one of the most complete libraries of detective stories, authoritative tomes on ciphers, and the like. Also that he ran a free school for cryptographers—accepting only about one in each two hundred applicants, rejecting the others as below the mental standard necessary for men who sought places as confidential agents of the World Powers. Which was what his graduates became.

I was to write a personality sketch of him and a digest of his various activities, for a New York magazine in "say, 3000 words." I promised that to the editor, glibly enough—but little knowing.

I met the Colonel—a vigorous, pink cheeked martinet of seventy, deep voiced, needing a shave and haircut, dressed in a rumpled suit of pongee made for the humid July heat of inland Illinois, and filled with a boundless enthusiasm.

On his estate I was to find nine or ten big buildings—experimental laboratories devoted to smashing the rim of the horizon in Physics, Medicine and Surgery, Electricity, Chemistry and other sciences. Here, backed by his money and enthusiasm, any research worker with what seemed a great idea, could come and test it to the limit. If new equipment was necessary, the Colonel bought it. If a new building was needed, the Colonel built it. The only restriction he imposed, was that every invention and discovery made at his laboratories must be patented in the name of the people of the United States—given to humanity, in other words!

I VISITED the laboratories—spent three days meeting, and talking with men whose normal thought processes began to function somewhere near that alarming region known as the fourth dimension. And I was beginning to perspire inwardly, thinking of my poor, insignificant little 3000 words . . .

I got my chance at the Colonel—if that is what one would call it. He sat down in a porch chair, facing me, and I began the usual hooey about how big a national figure he was, and how 2,148,633 magazine readers (count 'em!) were yearning for a close up of him and his work.

I didn't get far.

"Young man, do you know anything?" came his astounding interruption.

My mouth gaped open, and I stammered—but finally managed to claim a modest share of the world's erudition.

"Well, *what* do you know?"

Gosh, what a facer! My head suddenly seemed ready to pop like an electric light bulb; and inside it just one idiotic idea seemed to rattle like a broken filament. "Two times two is four! Two times two is four!"

And of course I couldn't say that! Once I *had* been able to name the books of the Bible; but now only a nonsensical jumble concerning Matthew, Mark, Luke, Warm, would come to my tongue! Let's see, I had once got good marks in history. What was the date of the Diet of Worms? What was it?

But the Colonel was impatient. "Speak up!" he commanded. "You went to college? Yes? Any graduate school?"

"R-Rush Medical," I managed to articulate.

"Hm! Who discovered America?"

"C-Christopher Columbus."

"Wrong. Leif the Lucky! Well, what is the capital of Montenegro?"

"Durban." That was a blind stab.

"Wrong! Cettinje. What is crysotile?"

"A—a sort of m-mosaic."

"Wrong! Asbestos fibers. Well, you studied anatomy. Where are your hip joints?"

Thoroughly dazed by now, I touched my hands to the outsides of my thighs, just below my belt.

"WRONG! They're *there!*" And he leaned forward, poking me in the correct places. "My Lord!"

And with that he snapped erect, glared for a moment, and then stalked off to his office and slammed the door.

So I didn't write the 3000 words. In thinking over the personality sketch, through the years, however, I've wondered whether it would have been of the Colonel, or of that insignificant lunkhead—TOI-YABE TOLMAN.

—And Taken as Meant

MAYBE my grin at the contents of the following letter was just a trifle one-sided, but the opinions expressed are so salty I'm going to pass along the script intact. Since I've been annoyed by road signs—Ye Goodie Shoppe, Ye Olde Tyme Tannerie, Ye Pygge and Whistle, and a million more in a country that seems to have become all ye'd up—I get Mr. Richardson perfectly. I'll have Rube Goldberg invent me a ten-stamp *yuh*-eradicator, and install it right next to the blue pencil bin . . .

Congratulations—tentative at least—on an issue of your magazine which apparently is clean of *yuh's!* I have just had your November 1st number in my hands—after I had sworn off *Adventure* forever—and am delighted with it.

Somewhere in my driving I picked up the October 15th issue for company in a hotel bedroom. But I read the Gideon Bible in preference; it contained no *yuh's*. The magazine was broken out with them like a smallpox patient, and in the desquamatory stage at that. I could not open it at any page but they would shake out like dandruff. Since it was patently impossible that that number of American fiction writers should all have the obsession that they did their whole duty to American dialect by abuse of the second personal pronoun, responsibility landed squarely on your office force. They seemed to have resolved "This now is a picturesque character. Therefore he must say *yuh*. We don't know how he does it, or how he gets that way; his sister must not, nor the cowtown banker, nor the designing person from New York; but he positively must. Else how the 2-M dash will you lunkheads of readers know that he is a picturesque character?

It seemed to be a recent growth. I dug up a handful of *Adventures* from 1923, one night, and while terrific 2-M dashes scorched and blistered from every page, I noticed that there were no *yuh's*. So I diagnosed your present case as hopeless and said, "Oh, hell, let the damn' thing go!" But habit asserted itself when I passed a newsstand in Alexandria Saturday night, and I bought one more—and am glad I did.

I see one picturesque sailor-person who says "Yah" every time he attempts to address another; but the author tries to use German words without knowing how to spell any of them, so how should he know what he is doing otherwise?

These are mere matters of finish, and it is perhaps a shame to insist on them with a magazine that is putting up such a line of clean, vigorous stuff. But does not finish make the difference between first-class and second-class matter? My criticisms are very kindly meant.—TALBOT RICHARDSON, Fullerton, Louisiana.

Gault of the Princess Pats

SEVERAL inquiries have come in, regarding this famous battalion and its leader. Mr. Case offers to supply information.

May I take a moment of your time to correct a statement made by Lieut. Glen R. Townsend in your last issue, *re* the Princess Pats, and Major, later Colonel, A. Hamilton Gault.

Col. Gault was wounded several times during the war. He lost one leg, an eye, and had seventeen shrapnel wounds in various parts of his body.

After he gave up the command of the Pats, on account of his wounds, he took command of the reserve battalion, back of the lines. He was under express orders to keep out of the lines, and had a captain detailed to follow him at all times, to see that he obeyed that order, as he had a fondness for slipping away to the front and getting into action with his old battalion.

The last time I met him, was in London in 1924. He was running in a bye-election for Parliament, but was defeated. As far as I know, he is still alive and kicking.

Any further information I can furnish you about the P. P. C. L. I. will be gladly sent.—JAMES E. CASE, Box 101, Station A., El Paso, Texas.

Omar of Dauphin Street

The new *Adventure*—stories over par—
A plate of gumbo at the sidewalk bar,
And time to thrill with Tuttle, Burtis,
Friel—
Ah! poverty is gone, 'tis banished far!

AND while Mr. Whitener's queries in respect to the Mosquito Indians and others will be answered by a member of the "Ask *Adventure*" staff, it may be that some reader comrade has a fund of interesting information, as well.

I just want to express my appreciation of your magazine. I'm not of voting age yet, but I have read it for five years. I think the story that I enjoyed most was "The Jararaca" by A. O. Friel. I've noticed that there have been hardly any stories of Central America though. I wonder why? Is it because there's no story material here? There should

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He-Man

My pony's in the pasture an' my saddle's in the shed,
An' my chaps are where I hung 'em on a peg upon the wall,
An' I'm in a blamed hospital, with a nurse beside my bed,
An' the doctor says it's likely that I won't get up at all.

But the doc don't know a he-man when he sees one, you can bet,
An' the doc don't know a cowboy that is made of grit an' steel;
If I've got to kick the bucket—but I ain't surrendered yet—
I'll kick it with my boots on an' a spur upon each heel.

Pitch me my corduroys an' my old blue flannel shirt;
It's me for windy prairies where the lean cow-mammas bawl!
Ain't my side a-hurtin'? Yes, Ma'm, but hurt, dad blame you, hurt!
I'll die out in the open, if I've got to die at all!

—WHITNEY MONTGOMERY

be. Everywhere except here. I think perhaps I'll have to try it.

I think that I have gone the limit when it comes to buying this magazine. In Mobile, in the spring of '25 I had exactly 50c and no job. 25c I spent for something to eat and with the other 25c I bought an *Adventure.* That was my last cent and I spent some hungry days after that, but I never regretted the 25c. I wonder if anyone else appreciates your magazine as much as that?

I'd like some information about the Mosquito, or Miskito Indians of this section. What was their connection with England? Was there a negro crowned king of Mosquitia? And the Sumas' blankets of bark; how are they made? Where do these people get the word *chancha* for hog? It's not Mosquito or Spanish, for I've not been able to locate it in any dictionary.—HOWARD X. WHITENER, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua.

Well, Now in This Case—

WE'RE sorry, too. The Indian flute has vanished from our ken, quite as 'Gene Cunningham's boa hide and other trophies, from his. But this sort of thing will not happen to future contributions. If readers, writers, Ask *Adventure* consultants and others care for the idea of a trophy room, here on the fifteenth floor of the Butterick Building—a room which will be theirs to visit and enjoy at any time—trophies sent in will be cared for vigilantly and in the best possible manner. Cunningham is the first to express an opinion on the project. What do the rest of you think?

In the current issue—which shapes up blame' well, I must say, what of such as Steamer Nason and Harold Lamb therein—you broach a subject upon which, apparently, you have always nursed the same idea which I've had, hazily—the establishment of a vista of walls covered with this or that bit of storied stuff.

I've always kicked myself because, in the years of my own wandering around the world, I never seemed to save anything. There was an eight-foot boa constrictor hide from Nicaragua—vanished right here ten years ago; and the skin of a ninety-seven pound jaguar that my old single action Colt brought down from overhead on a jungle trail up close to Playa Grande, Nicaragua. And so on—Apparently, *Adventure* has been doing about as I did. And with you I cry that it's time to stop, and begin assembling stuff.

Buck Connor once gave *Adventure* a precious Indian flute; it was passed on to some museum or other. I fancy that other things have gone the same route. And contributions would surely come if the word went around. Put an open letter in Camp-Fire addressed to "E. A. Westin, La Union, Salvador." Ask him what he thinks about the idea. I fancy that you'll get the germs of a collection by return steamer. For E. A. is not only one hell of a fine scout, but an adventurer from the back! I ought to know, having loafed in his patio and devoured the back numbers missed in the jungle.

The Navy gang would certainly come on deck with a rush. Same for the leathernecks and the Army.

Well, that's enough for one evening, I reckon. Incidentally, the cover on the current number was particularly appealing. Yep, by their pictures ye shall know them.—CUNNINGHAM.

The Missing

Croat and Turk and Russian Jew,
A little knot of English too,
A tight lipped Yank athwart the bar—
For this is where the homeless are.

What crimes they did, what hearts they wrung
Are here not destined to be sung.
The curse of memory is their lot.
And folks forget—but they do not.

They parted without pomp or show.
The hearts they broke they'll never know.
For moving swiftly from that mess
They never heard; they only guess.

But laughter hides the tears of men
And makes them almost whole again.
It is not always wise to think;
It pains too much, and so they drink.

Their laughter is a trifle hoarse;
Their jests are just a trifle coarse.
They laugh and sing and so they rot.
And folks forget, but they do not.

Insect!

THE following interesting account of the Chinese story of Creation, probably will be somewhat less popular in America than Darwinism. Beside the Oriental's idea of a white man's ancestor, a monkey seems like a good deal of a regular fellow.

Recently I was in a room where a Bible Class, for our Shanghai defenders, was being held. Some statements made as to the first two chapters of Genesis and the creation of the world; and the origin of man almost made my hair stand on end. How they did try to explain away the clear teachings of the Word of God! The thought came into my mind that the Chinese teachings could "go them one better" in several respects, and you might like to know what the Chinese say about the creation.

The male and female principles, *yang* and *yin*, gave birth to Pan-Ku, the first man—how none knows. Faith must accept that. He had two horns and was a short stubby fellow; but endowed with the ability to grow. He proceeded to grow. He grew six feet every day, and as he lived 18,000 years, you can see how big he got. He, in some way, got possession of an ax, and with that he managed to *kai-pih tien di*, hew out the universe. This was seemingly out of nothing or at least out of chaos.

He was eighteen thousand years doing the work, and in order to complete it all he had to die. His head is said to have become "the mountains, his breath the winds and clouds, his voice the thunder, his limbs the four quarters of the earth, his blood the rivers, his flesh the soil, his beard the constellations, his skin and hair the herbs and trees; his teeth, bones and marrow became the metals, rocks and precious stones, his sweat the rain," and (most suggestive of all to evolutionists!) "the insects creeping over his body became human beings!" I hope we are proud of our ancestry!

Chinese speak of three kinds of insects that delight in man's "fellowship," the "crawlers, the jumpers, and the smellers." I asked a Chinese to which race he belonged. He said he did not know but that the "foreigners must belong to the crawlers, for they are white!"

The picture I send shows Pan-Ku and his apron of leaves and his ax. In his hands he holds up the sun (red) and moon. He failed to put them in their proper places and they went away into the Han (sea) and the people were left in darkness. A messenger was sent to ask them to go into the sky and give light. They refused. Pan-Ku was called and at Buddha's direction wrote the character *zeh*, sun, in one hand and *yuih*, moon, in the other; and going to the sea, he stretched out his hands and called the sun and moon, repeating a charm devoutly seven times. Then they ascended into the sky and gave light day and night. There are many more things told of Pan-Ku; but I cannot tell all in one letter. In the creation he made fifty-one stories. Of these thirty-three were for heaven and eighteen were for hell below the earth. The heavens were graded for good men and the floors below the earth were for bad men. If one is the very best of all he can go to the thirty-third heaven and be worshiped as a god. If one be very bad he'll go down to the eighteenth hell.

Even in 18,000 years the work of creation was not completed; but a cavity was left through which many fell to the bottom. After a long time a woman, Nu-Ku, was born and she took stone and blocked up the hole and so finished the work of creation. They say, though the body of Pan-Ku died, his soul lives and will live forever. Just after the beginning of the Chinese Republic the "Philosophers" said that a revelation had come from heaven saying that the king of the gods had asked Pan-Ku to build a new heaven for him—the thirty-fourth. This was done and the king of gods with his retinue moved into this. How this revelation came is not told.—(REV.) H. G. C. HALLOCK, C. P. O. Box No. 1234, Shanghai, China.

Robinson Crusoe

MR. SEARLES, himself an adventurer of parts, begs leave to differ with Captain Dingle on the question of when and how Alexander Selkirk was rescued.

Although usually hesitant about expressing opinions, I cannot permit to go unanswered the assertion of Captain Dingle in the issue of September 15 that Alexander Selkirk, the original of Robinson Crusoe, was rescued by Lord Anson. The rescue was effected by Woodes Rogers in 1709, whereas Anson appeared in the Pacific many years later, leaving England on September 18, 1740, to be exact. Here is the real story.

In 1703 William Dampier the noted English voyager, writer and pirate of the 18th century, left England in command of two ships, the *St. George* and the *Cinque Ports Galley*. A year or so later the two ships separated following a dispute between Dampier and Captain Stradling of the *Cinque Ports Galley*. After harassing the Spanish of South America and Panama, Dampier crossed the Pacific, was made prisoner by the Dutch in the East Indies, was later released and returned to England.

Stradling also plundered the Spaniards, and in October 1704 put into Juan Fernandez island for provisions and some refitting. Here he terminated a long standing dispute with Alexander Selkirk, master of the ship, by marooning him. It may be remarked that in those days the "master" of a ship was usually the officer who did the navigating; he naturally was subordinate to the captain.

In 1708, Captain Woodes Rogers set sail from England with two ships, the *Duke* commanded by himself, and the *Duchess* commanded by his subordinate, Captain Stephen Courtney. As a matter of curiosity it is worth telling that the second in command of the *Duke* was Thomas Dover, "a Doctor of Physic and Captain of the Marines," who was the originator of that well known medical remedy, Dover Powders, while another of the crew was Simon Hatley, who later as second captain under George Shelvocke in the *Speedwell* killed the albatross which led to Coleridge writing his famous poem, "The Ancient Mariner." William Dampier on his fourth and last voyage around the world was pilot of the *Duke*.

On February 1, 1709, the two ships touched at Juan Fernandez island. Woodes Rogers tells of finding Selkirk in the following language—

"—— out yawl, which we had sent ashore, did not return as soon as was expected, so we sent our pinnace armed to see the occasion of her stay. The pinnace returned immediately from the shore, and brought an abundance of crawfish, with a man clothed in goat's skins, who looked more wild than the first owners of them. He had been on the island four years and four months. His name was Alexander Selkirk, a Scotchman who had been master of the *Cinque Ports Galley*, a ship which came here with Captain Dampier, (Note. By "here" Woodes Rogers must refer to the South Seas and not to Juan Fernandez Island, as it was Stradling who marooned Selkirk and not Dampier), "who told me that this was the best man in her; so I immediately agreed with him to be a mate on board our ship.

"During his stay on Juan Fernandez he saw several ships pass by, but two only anchored. He went to view them, and finding them to be Spaniards, retired from them, upon which they shot at him. He said, if they had been French, he would have surrendered himself to them; but the Spaniards in these parts, he apprehended would kill him, or make a slave of him and send him to the mines. Some of the Spaniards came so near him that he had difficulty to make his escape. They not only shot at him, but pursued him into the woods, where he concealed himself by climbing into a tree.

"He was born at Largo in the county of Fife in Scotland, and had been bred to the sea from his youth. The reason of his being left at Juan Fernandez was a difference between him and his captain, Stradling."

Rogers goes on to tell of Selkirk's manner of living on the solitary island. Later Selkirk was appointed Master of a Spanish prize, the *Marquis*, renamed the *Bachelor*, in which he completed the voyage round the world, arriving in London on October 14, 1711.

Defoe knew Selkirk in London and made the latter's experiences the basis of "Robinson Crusoe," although he laid the scene on another island, probably Tobago. As Defoe died in 1731 (according to my recollection) and Lord Anson did not leave England until nine years later, it, of course, is out of the question to attribute to Anson the rescue of Selkirk.

Most of the above information has been dug out of journals and logs of the 18th century voyagers, particularly the various writings of Dampier, "A Cruising Voyage Round the World" by Woodes Rogers, an account written by Edward Cook, second captain of the *Duchess*, "A Chronological History of the Discoveries in the South Sea," by James Burney, etc.

May I add here a few words of my sincere appreciation of "Adventure"? I have read it practically continuously since the first issue and in many parts of the world. From Norway to Morocco, and Boston to China, to say nothing of Haiti, Cuba, Panama, Mexico, Guam, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, and a few other countries. My reading is quite varied, anything from Spengler's "Decline of the West," and the Dial, to the old but always interesting tales of Charles Lever; but as a steady diet I prefer *Adventure*. I have always enjoyed a good yarn which also contains accurate color, and from my experiences in a number of countries, I can say that the writers of *Adventure* seldom err.

And the Camp-Fire is without a peer as a meeting place of the wanderers of the earth, all of whom contribute their mite to the collection of stories and data, published and unpublished, concerning the spirit of *Adventure* and all it connotes. Whether it be Harold Lamb telling of the Mongols (incidentally I have just finished his "Genghis Khan" and heartily recommend it as a superlative adventure story), Bishop on medieval Italy, or Pendexter on early American history, I read with interest and I am sure with profit. With many others I have learned a thousand and one things about blowguns, centipedes, lariats, sabres, sailing, and a host of other subjects.

My heartiest congratulations to each and every person connected with the magazine, together with long life, adventure, and prosperity—though alas, the three are hardly compatible!

—P. J. SEARLES, 2 Rollins Place, Boston, Mass.

Cowboys of the South

MR. COLVILLE found little of knightly chivalry or romance in the South American *gaucho*. He tells of these "devils when drunk" from first hand experience.

Reading an article in *Adventure* Camp-Fire, September 1st issue, by Post Sargent, concerning the *gaucho* of the Argentine; I would like to say something of the *gaucho* of forty years ago, as I lived among them away back in 1886–7, both in the provinces of Corrientes and the Gran Chaco.

These places at that time were what one might call the outposts of civilization, more especially the Gran Chaco, where the Toba Indians used at times to attack small settlements, stealing horses and cattle when the opportunity presented itself, and where it was extremely dangerous to travel around except when one was well armed.

I am inclined to disagree with Post Sargent when he fixes the year 1860 as the latest period in which the real *gaucho* existed, and as to the latter being like a knight of romance, why that is absurd.

Up to the time of General Roca's campaign of about 1876, when he drove the Pampas Indians south of the Rio Negro, there is no doubt that the *gauchos* of the Province of Buenos Aires were little changed from what they were fifty years before; but probably after that date quite a change took place.

I am sure that forty years ago the customs of the *gauchos* of the provinces of Entre Rios and

Corrientes were very little changed from those of their fathers or grandfathers, and they still retained all the characteristics of these. They still wore the *chiripa*, carried a *facon* or long knife attached to their *ricados* or saddles, which they were not slow to use, and played the old game of *"la taba,"* with the knuckle bone of an ox. I have frequently seen pictures of *gauchos* wearing *bombachos;* in fact in the moving pictures of Ibanez's "Four Horsemen" they are so depicted. In the old days no *gaucho* wore *bombachos*, he wore the *chiripa*, and very frequently *botas de potro.*

The *gauchos* of Corrientes all spoke a mixture of Spanish and Guarani, which made it very hard for one to understand them, even if conversant with Spanish. They had troubadors of a sort—if one who tinkled a guitar and improvised some rude verses could be so designated.

Ordinarily they did not interfere with gringos when sober; but were the very devil when drunk.

They were very fond of horse racing, but their races were mere sprints of a few hundred yards, and they always rode their races without saddles. Many of them wore their hair long, hanging almost to the shoulders; and a *gaucho malo* was always to be avoided by anyone who put any value on his life.—T. B. COLVILLE, London Bldg., Vancouver, B. C.

X. Berdler

HERE'S a little sidelight on a real old-timer of the West who played a part in one of our stories. It is always interesting to hear from those of you who recognize a real character or incident which an author has woven into his yarn. Maybe because our authors know especially well whereof they write, such characters and incidents are not uncommon in stories in *Adventure.*

I have got to talk to you. Hugh Pendexter's bringing X. Berdler into one of his stories is the cause of my imposing on you with one more letter added to the lot you must get. I lived in Montana in 1880 and 1881 on a ranch 40 miles from Helena and during the Fall and Winter of '81 in the Yellowstone Country. I knew X. Berdler. He was the deputy U. S. Marshall in Helena. He was short, stocky, a little lame and had a slight German accent. He was the head of the Vigilantes, though they didn't have much to do then. If any bad hombre drifted in to town and started to make war medicine, he got a notice signed 3—7—77 and either got out or got hung.

The first time I met Berdler was in a saloon where a lot of old timers were sitting around a table drinking beer and telling stories. I listened for a while and started to go. I had ridden in from the ranch that day and was tired and sleepy. As I got up I looked into the muzzle of a gun that looked like a mountain Howitzer. Berdler was behind it and where it came from I never knew. He sure was some swift. He wanted to know if I was going to listen to *his* story or not. I told him I certainly was if I could hunt my blankets afterward as I needed rest.

Of course, the gun play was just to josh the "pilgrim" and amuse the crowd. X. didn't use the trigger of his guns, but worked the hammer with his thumb. I had other experiences with Berdler, whom I got to know quite well. I have heard tales of a raid made in the Yellowstone County by a posse headed by Berdler in 1882. The story of it has been written. I don't think it has been published.

There was a ferry over the river at Glendive and a band of horse thieves drove the plunder from the South across the river and up to Canada. That was the gang that posse was after. We met many of them but for some reason I never can explain were never molested. We lost all our horses in the Valley of the Mussel Shell River, but they were robbed and we found them shortly. Indians, I think, from the unshod sorry tracks.

This is getting too long, but the memory of X. Berdler is responsible.—W. A. CABLE, N. Y. C.

Serials

YOUR NEXT number of this magazine begins one of the very finest western novels I have ever read. It is a tale of breadth, dignity and breathless suspense—"Texas Man," by William MacLeod Raine. As a rule I do not believe in editorial ecstasies, preferring to let the stories speak for themselves. Yet here is one novel, by the author of such books as "The Desert's Price," "Colorado," and "The Roaring River," which I'd honestly like to have every *Adventure* patron make a point of reading.

And for the rest of the year following "Texas Man," *Adventure* is exceptionally well fixed. A long novel of Hashknife and Sleepy, by W. C. Tuttle will follow in two parts. And then comes a vigorous story of mutiny and mystery at sea, by George Allan England. To finish the year in splendid shape, there will be a circus novel by Thomson Burtis, and a weird, gripping mystery of the Amazon jungle, by Arthur O. Friel.

One query. Is the program of one serial novel in long installments, at a time, generally satisfactory?—ANTHONY M. RUD.

ASK Adventure

For ***free information*** **and** ***services*** **you can't get elsewhere**

Big Game Country

ALMOST all of the hunting grounds in the West today are located within National forests, but hunters and campers who observe the game and fire laws are welcome.

Request:—"I would like to know of a good place to hunt big game for the winter; and what equipment to take along. Are the Olympian Mountains out around Forks and Port Angeles across from Victoria as good hunting—in the vicinity of what they call the Hole and Eden Valley?"—JOHN K. PENNELL, Ohio City, Ohio.

Reply, by Mr. Ernest W. Shaw:—I know of no place in the United States (with the exception of Alaska) where hunting is permitted throughout the winter. In all of the big game States the open hunting seasons for the various kinds of big game all close with the month of December or earlier. There are also open and closed seasons for all big game in Alaska, but prospectors and miners are given some latitude if killing for food.

There is excellent hunting for mountain sheep, elk and black-tail deer in northwestern Wyoming just south of the Yellowstone Park. You can either go in by way of Cody, Wy., or else by Ashton and Driggs, Idaho, thence over Teton Pass by stage into Jackson Hole. There is also fair elk and deer hunting in Montana on the West Fork of the Gallatin River north of the Park, going in by way of Bozeman, Mont.

But in either case you would have to employ guides with horses and pack outfits, and the guide would furnish everything but personal apparel, rifle, etc. The best deer country of which I know at the present time, is around Thompson Falls, Montana. Within the same general radius of country you can find both white-tail and black-tail deer in goodly numbers. The country you mention on the Olympic Peninsula is a fair game country, for elk and black-tail deer, but it is a tough country to hunt in. The mountains rise from the beaches on both sides, and it is all "on edge" as the old timers say. Also the undergrowth is heavy. I consider it poor hunting country.

Almost all of the game country in the West today is located within some National forest. The forest officers are also game wardens. A hunter has nothing to fear from them or the State wardens so long as he observes the game laws. The Forest Service recognizes the value of the forests for recreational purposes and welcomes their use by hunters and campers. However, they expect all such to observe the game and fire laws. The forest rangers will generally be found helpful in suggesting good camping and hunting country.

It takes a well filled pocket book to make a hunting trip to any of the big game countries today. Particularly those States where the law requires that you hunt with an authorized guide. Also the hunting country is in most cases remote from the railroad and as distances are great, horses and the necessary outfit are absolutely necessary. The country I mentioned around Thompson Falls, Montana, is the only place with which I am familiar where you can get fair hunting on foot from the railroad, but the only game is the two kinds of deer and an occasional bear. Bear and all other predatory animals are not protected in Montana, but there is a closed and open season on bear in Wyoming. There is very little good hunting left in Colorado. There are a few places where elk and mountain sheep are still plentiful but there is no open season for either. One can get the greatest variety of big game in either Alaska or British Columbia. Moose, deer, caribou, sheep and goat but no elk. There may be a very few of the latter left in British Columbia, but they would be found in a country where the other kinds of game except deer would be very scarce or not at all.

Long Distance Rifle Fire

A GOOD marksman with a good gun ought to get his man pretty regularly at one thousand yards. Snipers, telescopic sights and silencers.

Request:—"The other evening a friend of mine and I had a very lengthy discussion on the merits of the U. S. Army rifle. First of all this friend of mine claims that an expert marksman, such as a sniper, can with consistency hit a man at the distance of 1000 yards.

He also claims that the same man equipped with the finest rifle, best ammunition, telescopic sights, wind gauge and other instruments used for fine long distance shooting, can with fair consistency hit an object the size of a man at distances up to three and four miles.

I very strongly disagreed with him on this, and the results are that we are seeking reliable information on this matter. Will you please answer the following questions for me.

1. What kind of a rifle was used by the snipers in the World War? Please give caliber, weight, whether equipped with silencers or not.

2. What kind of ammunition did they use? Give weight of bullet, powder charge, etc.

3. What was the average distance they had to shoot? And what were some of the longest distances they could shoot at with accuracy?

4. What is the size of the target they shoot at in the Army? Give sizes from 500 yards up to the longest distance, also the sizes of the bull's eyes at these distances.

5. What are the qualifications of a sniper?

6. Can you give me the trajectory on bullets, say from 1000 yards up to the maximum distances that these bullets will carry. The bullets that I have reference to are the ones used by expert snipers in the U. S. Army.

7. Can you tell me how far a 30'06 220 gr. bullet will carry?

8. What kind of sights did these sniping rifles have on? Did they have the ordinary telescopic sights such as made by Belding & Mull or did the ordnance experts perfect their own, which were superior to those above mentioned?"—H. E. FURRER, 226 4th Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—I believe that, under favorable circumstances, such as clear dry weather, good terrain and his victim unable to escape to disconcert the rifleman by return fire, a good shot would get his man pretty regularly at a thousand yards, could he have the range correctly estimated.

As to the second part, I'll say that the range of the Service rifle is only about three miles, or slightly over that, when fired at a high angle, and considering air currents, etc., your stand upon the matter is correct. I regard a hit at over fifteen hundred yards as a matter of luck, all shooting stories to the contrary notwithstanding; and yet again, remember Louis Mulliken's story of the shooting he witnessed with the big Sharps at the black hat, hit at a measured range of a mile, if I recall correctly?

TO THE rest of the inquiries:

1. I believe that Service rifles, more reliable than the average run as regarded their accuracy, were the favored snipers' weapons in the War. A distant relative of mine used a telescope sighted Springfield, and while he volunteers no information as to his "kill" nor did I inquire, still he tells me he kept that rifle pretty warm for two days. Lying in a weed patch, *between* the woods that were being shelled, you see.

One Canadian told me he used the Ross right through the scrap, firing four hundred and twenty cartridges the 10th of November. He said the Ross was not the reliable action the S. M. L. Enfield was, but far more accurate, and the snipers had a chance to keep their rifles so free from mud, etc., that there was no trouble of malfunctioning, as was the case in the trenches.

I believe the Germans used the Service Mauser, with a 'scope sight, and believe the English favored Winchester or Alsis 'scopes. I don't know what our 'scope sight was, but know that Warner & Swazey furnished some. However, I believe our men generally used the Service sight for sniping. I knew of no use of the silencer.

2. Service ammunition was used, and as for charges, I'll say that a good many sorts were issued, I believe, Germany using at least two weights, and England two.

3. I believe the distances shot rarely exceeds a hundred and fifty yards; a man in a muddy uniform is hard to see over a hundred yards, if he lies still, you know.

4. Targets have bull's eyes as follows: 200 and 300 yards, ten inches in diameter; five and six hundred have a twenty inch bull's eye; and the eight and ten hundred yard ones have a 36 inch bull's eye, while the rapid fire target has a silhouette 19 by 26 inches. Targets are on paper six feet square.

5. I believe the qualifications of a sniper are to be an excellent shot, to be self-reliant, and to be able to keep concealed while doing great damage to the enemy.

6. I enclose the best ballistic table I know of, and have no figures for longer ranges.

7. I believe the .30 caliber 220 grain bullet will reach an extreme distance of about two and three-fourths miles, but have no figures on it at long range, so merely guess.

8. Belding & Mull are a post-war concern, although they may have been individually occupied in 'scope work for the Government during the War. I believe private makes of glasses were used abroad, and I think as stated in the first question answered, that we had some Warner & Swazey 'scope sights, but am not sure of this.

Fur Farming

PENNED animals are not promising pelt prospects. The raccoon, indispensable martyr to the proper outfitting of the college lad, is a fanatic for cleanliness.

Request:—"You write that you think one could do better at muskrat than mink farming. I would not care to be around marshy land which I understand is necessary for muskrat, although the first cost is important to me.

Please let me know if there are any other reasons why you do not think well of the mink outside of the first cost, and is there some other animal that could be raised similar to mink that you would suggest instead?

Please let me know what you think of skunk raising also."—James Fischer, New York, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Fred L. Bowden:—Yes there are quite a lot of reasons why I should not want to try and raise mink. Mink are a whole lot harder to handle and raise than muskrats; they are more or less quarrelsome too, especially in the breeding season, they are not so prolific as the 'rats either.

Then you would need almost as marshy land for mink as muskrats, while he is perhaps not quite so aquatic as the muskrats he certainly spends a lot of his time in the water, and does not do well if he can't get to water. I am one of those fellows who has found out through quite costly experience that you can't really successfully raise fur bearers in pens—it is not according to nature. You have got to fence a place large enough to have your animals run and partly at least approximate their natural wild state; then you will have good success.

I have seen a good many people make a failure of fur farming, just because they would not spend the money at the start to properly fence a living and breeding place for their stock.

Skunk would be O. K. for your purpose except for the fact that I think skunk would do better a little further south than New Brunswick. You must remember that the winters there are long and very cold. From the first of November till the middle of May, snow and lots of it.

Raccoons might hit you better than skunks. I think they would be O. K. there, and there are never enough raccoon skins to go around in the spring fur sales. Raccoons are easily handled; in fact they make fine pets. Of course the proper fencing of a tract large enough for them is quite an expense, for you not only have to figure on keeping the raccoons in but you have to plan to keep dogs out, and all trees near the fence, or with branches hanging over the fence have to be removed. If you decide on raccoons though you will have to figure on having at least a brook on the tract where you raise them, as the raccoon will eat nothing that he does not wash first.

Silver Dollar

HOW MANY of you have ever heard of Anthony D. Francisci? Yet copies of his art are almost as numerous and widespread as those of "The Horse Fair," "Washington Crossing the Delaware" and "Breaking Home Ties."

Request:—"Please tell all you can of the American silver dollar. How old is the present design? Who was the person whose profile appears on the coin? Was the earliest dollar similar?"—Wm. Beaumont, Mangum, Okla.

Reply, by Mr. Howland Wood:—The present dollar was designed in 1921 by Anthony D. Francisci. It is said he used his wife as a model. But as in similar cases of this nature, it is not necessarily a portrait.

The first type of dollar appeared in 1794 and the same design continued for a while in 1795. Later in this year a new design appeared which continued into 1804. There were no dollar coins for circulation from this time until 1840 when a dollar bearing the seated figure of liberty came out. This was coined until 1873.

The first two types of dollar had simply the head of liberty on one side and the usual eagle on the reverse. In 1878 the Bland dollar appeared bearing a large head of liberty facing left. This continued to be coined through 1904 and then ceased until 1921, when a number were coined of this type, so that we have 1921 dollars of two different types.

Deepest Sea

HOW soundings are taken for official record.

Request:—"Where is the deepest place in the ocean that there is any true report upon?"—Dorothy Daniels, Los Gatos, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Charles Bell Emerson:—The deepest place that is known of and on official record up to date is about six miles off the coast of Porto Rico, and the figures state the depth as being 31,366 feet (about 6 miles).

Depths in the ocean are "sounded" with steel piano-wire not larger than one-thirtieth of an inch in diameter, using a lead weight of (sometimes) 70 lbs., which is detachable. The soundings are made by means of a special machine fitted with a brake, and so adjusted that the revolution of the drum is stopped automatically at the instant the lead weight touches the bottom of the sea, and the depth can then be read directly from the indicator. The sounding machine measures the length of the wire which has run out before the lead strikes the bottom.

This German piano wire does not "stretch" like other wire, and that is why it has been adopted as the most reliable.

Cherokees

AN OUTLINE of the history of this once powerful tribe of red men. Chief Double Head and a doubly equipped mandible.

Request:—"Could you give me some information about the Cherokee Indians that inhabited the Tenn. Valley?

Were the Cherokees a wealthy tribe? Did any government, or anybody, buy land from them? Did they have a chief named Double Head, and where was he killed—or did he die a natural death?

Also what were their burial customs? Did they inhabit caves or bury their dead in caves?

Did Double Head have a silver or gold mine? If so, what part of Alabama?

About fifteen years ago my grandfather found a jaw bone of a man, with a double row of teeth; it was the lower bone. He, and several more said it was Double Head's jaw. Could you tell me if that was why he was named D. H.? If not why?"—Wallace Morrison, Florence, Ala.

Reply, by Mr. Arthur Woodward:—The Cherokee peoples of whom you speak were formerly one of the most powerful tribes in the South. They were linguistically affiliated with the Iroquois and claimed all of the territory now included in the mountain region of the southern Alleghenies, in what is now southwest Virginia, western North Carolina and South Carolina, northern Georgia, eastern Tennessee and north eastern Alabama and even laid claim to the lands as far north as the Ohio River. Their tribal name, Cherokee, is a corruption of Tsalagi or Tsaragi, which name they applied to themselves, although they sometimes spoke of themselves as Ani Yunwiya, "Real People." Their distant kinsmen, the Iroquois of the north in New York, called them Oyata ge Renen, or "People of the Cave Country."

They were first encountered by De Soto in his wanderings in 1540 in the southern Allegheny region. About 150 years later they encountered the English in the Carolinas. In 1759 they took up arms against the English and during the Revolution they fought against the U. S., continuing the struggle until 1794. It was during this period that parties of the Cherokee pushed down Tennessee River and formed new settlements at Chickamauga and other points along the Tennessee-Alabama line.

Shortly after 1800 missionary work began among them and they adopted a regular form of government modeled on that of the U. S. in 1820. At the height of their prosperity gold was discovered on their lands near the present Dahlonega, Ga., and a movement among the whites was started to bring about the removal of the Cherokees to less desirable ground.

It had its effect and after long years of fruitless struggle the Cherokees gave in and by the treaty of New Echota, Dec. 29, 1835, they sold their entire remaining territory and agreed to remove beyond the Mississippi, where they took up land in what later became the Cherokee strip in Indian Territory, now a part of the State of Oklahoma. The bulk of the descendants of the Cherokee occupy lands in Oklahoma today, although there may be some who live in their old homelands.

THE Double Head you mention was a Cherokee chief who led bands of his people during the latter part of the Revolutionary period until about 1817. In 1806 he in company with another chief by the name of Tolluntakee signed a secret treaty with the U. S. agents whereby Double Head and the other chiefs (there were some others involved but I have not their names) were to receive special rewards for persuading their countrymen to part with this land.

This action plus other deeds which the Cherokees viewed as traitorous (there being a law enacted in 1820 by the Cherokee Nation making it punishable by death for any member of the tribe to enter into negotiations for the sale of any tribal lands without the consent of the national council) brought about Double Head's death in 1817. Even before the law the Cherokees viewed with distaste the selling of their lands by the chiefs, and accordingly some of the men acted as voluntary executioners.

A prominent sub-chief of the Cherokee by the name of Major John Ridge, part white and part Cherokee, as were many of the foremost leaders of the Cherokee at the time, took a party and acted as executioners of Double Head. His Indian name was Taltsuska, literally Two Heads; why the name I do not know.

According to one account of the slaying, Major Ridge and his men trailed Double Head to a tavern owned by a man named M'Intosh and in the evening he was shot by Ridge but escaped with a desperate wound and hid himself in a nearby house. He was found however by an Indian by the name of Saunders who was with Ridge. Saunders promptly drove his tomahawk into Double Head's skull, finishing the job. This is said to have taken place near the agency in Calhoun, Georgia. Major Ridge was himself slain at a later date, June 1839, in company with other chiefs who signed a treaty with the whites at New Echota giving up Georgia lands for the reason mentioned (discovery of gold).

As to the gold or silver mine owned by Double Head I have no information. Possibly he may have had one and again that may be just local tradition. Such yarns spring up with the passing of the years. Little is known of the old burial customs of the Cherokee save that they buried on top of the ground and heaped stones over the bodies. They also probably buried their dead in mounds. The idea of the cave burials probably arises from the fact that the Cherokee were termed Cave Dwellers by some of their enemies.

The TRAIL AHEAD

The next issue of ADVENTURE

BEGINNING
A POWERFUL NOVEL OF EARLY ARIZONA

Texas Man

By William MacLeod Raine

The saga of *Boone Sibley*, rugged son of Texas pioneers, who strayed into the toughest town in Cochise County, was immediately requested to leave by the gunmen ring controlling the town—and thereupon decided that this was as interesting a place as any in which to settle down.

Two *Complete Novelettes:*

The Bird of Prey

By Charles Gilson

Greater even than his cunning was his unquenchable hatred for white men, this terrible, hawk-faced French expatriate, in whose cleverly laid net strangely diverse characters were to struggle—Chinese mandarin and Malay sultan, harem favorite and Eurasian plotter; but principally the American, *John Currie*, who was not exactly proper fare for any "bird of prey."

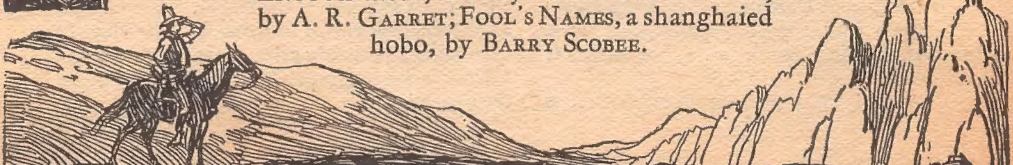
Red Harvest

By Hugh Pendexter

In that brawling town in the brand new Territory of Utah, honest merchants paid *Stephen Joyce* in gold for the beans, bacon and flour he brought up the river; but he found other merchants—those who had no yardsticks and no scales, who dealt, generally after dark, in commodities that could not be kept on counters or shelves, and who paid their debts with lead . . .

And—*Other Good Stories*

The Sundowner, a mystery of the South African veldt, by L. Patrick Greene; D'Artagnan of Hose Company No. 6, a braggart among the fire fighters, by Edward L. McKenna; Admiralty Orders, with the undersea boats in action, by Harold Bradley Say; The Committee, the Vigilantes and the bullies, by Raymond S. Spears; The Cross-Eyed Bull, *Don Miguel* and the glorious revenge, by Alan LeMay; Enough Rope, a story of the lumber mills, by A. R. Garret; Fool's Names, a shanghaied hobo, by Barry Scobee.



Black Kettle Mountain

A Novelette of the Ozarks by J. E. GRINSTEAD

Covered wagon days in the West and the hardships of the new life, and the primitive lawlessness of the isolated community. But Gabe Roark knew what to do to tame the wild element in the Black Kettle Mountain district.

TWO OTHER NOVELETTES

THE LONE YOUNG 'UN

by CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

A thrilling yarn with some well-handled gun play for good measure.

BETWEEN THE TIDES

by L. P. B. ARMIT

A novelette of pearl fishing and the perils that lurk in Ceylonese waters.

And in the same issue

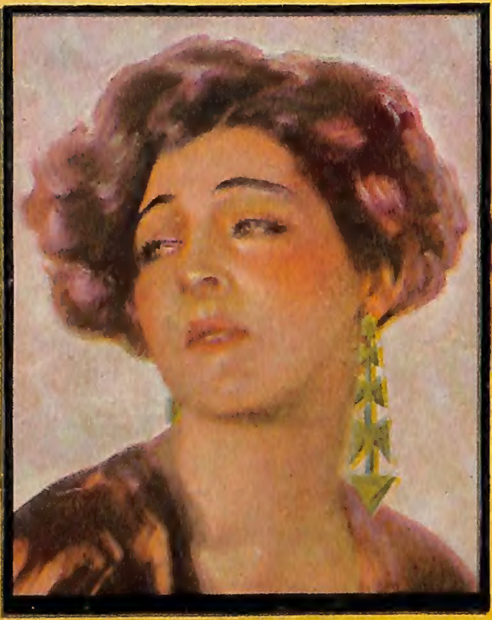
Serials by HUGH PENDEXTER and KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN; short stories by THOMAS THURSDAY, RAYMOND S. SPEARS, L. G. BLOCHMAN, and RAOUL WHITFIELD.

Everybody's

On sale January 20th 25c

"I certainly agree with Nazimova"

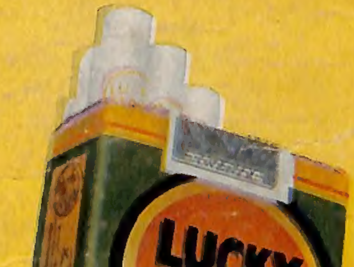
Said Consuelo Flowerton to Frank DeWeese as they rested between swims at Rockland Beach.



Nazimova, brilliant actress, writes:

"The Russian lady—ah, how she delights in the puff of a fragrant cigarette! As a Russian I have tried them all—the cigarettes of Cairo, Paris, London, Madrid—but here in my adopted country, America, I have found my favorite cigarette 'The LuckyStrike.' In addition to its lovely fragrance and wonderful flavor it has no bad effect upon my voice—so even when I go abroad I carry with me my little trunk of Luckies—and enjoy a puff from America."

Nazimova



"It's toasted"

No Throat Irritation-No Cough.